



Ministerial formation of theological students through distance education

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This article is published in the section Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.

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Dates:

Received: 31 Jan. 2012

Accepted: 14 Mar. 2012

Published: 12 June 2012

How to cite this article:

Naidoo, M., 2012, 'Ministerial formation of theological students through distance education', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(2), Art. #1225, 8 pages, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i2.1225>

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Ministerial formation is a multifaceted activity involving critical thinking, the acquisition of knowledge, skills development, religious identity formation and the development of ministerial and spiritual maturity expected of church ministers. Education is not merely the accumulation of a prescribed set of academic credits but includes the holistic formation of all aspects of the individual. However, theological educators are concerned about the capacity to foster such values and skills in the distance and electronic environment. Some see distance education as 'distancing' the students in more significant ways than simply geographic distance. These issues are of fundamental importance for they reflect the deeper convictions of theologians that distance education may not be a suitable medium for ministerial formation. This article creates a conceptual map of the theological and pedagogical challenges for ministerial formation and highlights how the possibility of formation is being carried out in the distance-learning environment.

Background

In the new South Africa with its rapid economic and social change, theological education has already seen significant developments of rationalisation within educational and ecclesiastical institutions, new accreditation standards and the impact of globalisation (Dreyer 2012; Werner 2009:260). Recognising the need for academic flexibility, theological education institutions are seeking new and approved ways to provide quality education. Advances in technology, the demands of an increasingly mobile and diverse population, economic realities, the emphasis on the democratisation of education and dissatisfaction with traditional models are some of the issues that sparked renewed interest in distance theological education through the 1980s and 1990s (Cannell 1999:6). Given this growth open distance learning (ODL) has become a policy option for a growing number of African states. In South Africa the bulk of distance education students are registered with the University of South Africa, with significant enrolments at the North-West University, University of Pretoria and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South African Institute for Distance Education [SAIDE] 2010). Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed. It includes, but is not restricted to, online courses and blended learning approaches: course design may or may not include a face-to-face component (Moore & Kearsley 2005). It is an attractive option in delivering educational programmes as it is becoming extremely difficult for the universities to accommodate the explosive demand for full-time studies on campus.

With this expansion there is also the widening digital or knowledge divide, not only between North and South, but very much also on the African continent, depending on the educational and socio-economic level of development in certain groups of society (Leary & Berger 2007:136). However, in Africa advanced forms of technology in distance education remain a challenge due to the lack of infrastructure development. In most developing countries of Africa, the successful adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) need to address different interlocking frameworks for change: infrastructure, attitude, staff development, support, sustainability and transferability (Mabunda 2010:239). A full adoption of ICT needs to take into account the socio-economic viability of the end users, along with government policies and national resources that are available (Brammoh 2003:14). The major emphasis continues to be on print and radio: this traditional approach is the best fit for distance education as an adaptation of delivery mechanisms to the infrastructure in Africa. But the surge of interest in new technologies is causing an eager population to become further connected, though still to varying degrees (Leary & Berger 2007:136).

The rapid transformation processes going on with regard to new ICTs are opening up new potentials in theological learning: e-learning, research exchange groups via Internet, distant master courses using digital formats and digital libraries. In South Africa the need for theological



education at a distance has grown and vocational colleges have long made use of correspondence distance learning to resource and equip local churches owing to the perceived benefits of potentially reduced costs through reaching a wide target audience. What distance education has done is to certify lay people for congregational leadership in vast rural areas in denominations that have suffered severe shortages of ordained clergy. A case in point is the Anglican and Methodist denominations that have studied via the Theological Education by Extension College of Southern Africa (Moodie 2008:55) and the University of South Africa (Werner 2009:79–80). The challenge in reflecting on local practice is that few theological colleges in South Africa have made use of online education due to the high cost of the infrastructure development (Werner 2009). Added to this, academics tend to be constrained about *doing* education rather than reflecting upon what it is they do. Hence there is very little scholarship on teaching and learning theology within distance higher education in South Africa and Africa as a whole. More still needs to be done in terms of research on how theological training institutions should make proper use of modern communication and information technologies for theological teaching.

Ministerial formational focus

In theological education, one of the recent advances has been the growing recognition that theological education should attend to the development of the whole person, that spiritual and character formation and relational skills are as significant as cognitive development in preparing people for successful Christian ministry (Overend 2007; Percy 2010). No longer is education conceived in terms of function and role or the transmission and absorption of information – instead it has become an ontological activity in which the prime goal is human development (Jarvis 2001). This has already involved a significant paradigm shift from pure education to training (Le Cornu 2003:15) intended to equip students with the ability and skills to perform a range of tasks. The attention to stack the curriculum with ‘what’ is to be learned (cognitively) has shifted to the manner of learning (critically) and ‘how’ questions (that deal with formation).

In higher education generally, the debate on ‘formation’ hovers around the integration of three aims: preparation for work, development of analytical thinking and critical reflection, and induction into a culture of ongoing and creative learning (Overend 2007). In forming ministers in higher education different emphases of approaches to theology are used along a continuum, where theological institutions involved in academic and/or ministerial education in theological education may be operating with a variety of understandings as to what theology is and how it is learned.¹

1. At universities, Religious Studies has emerged and has more and more dominated the scene. This has reinforced a more phenomenological approach, attempting to be more objective and value free, and thus to challenge the appropriateness of theology as an ecclesial discipline in the public sector. The division between belief and practice in academia is a symptom of modernity, one which has relegated theology to the private sphere, resulting in an overemphasis on the individual subject at the expense of the community, as well as a blindness to the formative power of culture and embodied existence.

For many years, theological institutions, particularly vocational ones, have acknowledged the need to keep an eye on what end product is required, asking what sort of person the churches need and designing programmes of study accordingly. At the same time, the goals of the traditional intellectual approach to the academic study of theology found in universities, often omit personal formational elements, despite evidence that students in these courses often enrol for formational reasons (Graham 2002:230). In some South African universities, theology faculties use the confessional model, however, it is the critical correlation and contextual models that are well established.

These vocational and academic models raise critical questions about what is required for faithful teaching and learning and impact on the formation of the theological students. If the intention or *telos* of formation is not existent in educational institutions, it becomes difficult to structure and align formational initiatives. The intention of ministerial formation in universities may be obscured by accreditation demands, the compartmentalisation of theological disciplines and the marginalisation of spirituality in the life of theological institutions.² Furthermore, the openness of the curriculum itself aids the ‘consumer mentality’ of culture, thus reinforcing the character and values of students and frustrating the theological faculty’s attempt to form them if desired (Neuhaus 1992:117). It would be difficult to seek to instil a specific *habitus* (Farley 1983) amongst theology students in a university classroom where similar ecclesial backgrounds or at least shared vocational trajectories cannot be assumed. Overend suggests that despite the developments towards a more holistic view of the individual learner in higher education, the dissonance between educational philosophy and theological understanding of the person and of formation would not seem to suggest that public universities are an ideal partner in learning for ministry (Overend 2007). The exception to this in South Africa is the Reformed tradition that is connected to three traditional White universities for the training of their ministers.

In spite of the tensions in the educational approach used in ministerial formation, it is encouraging to note that a recent study on the intentionality of spiritual formation in theological education in South Africa found that theological institutions were committed to the spiritual development of students during their training for church leadership (Naidoo 2011). Candidates for ministry enter into rigorous and critical theological inquiry and into the development of the skills needed to be effective pastoral agents. At the same time, they are challenged to grow in holiness and assume the habits of a Christian spirituality that supports ministerial service in the church. In a face-to-face setting, ministerial formation may take place through a variety of ways: the curriculum with particular courses in spirituality, through ministry reflection groups, the use of mentors or spiritual directors and engagement in the local church community (Marshall 2009).

2. University faculties have become so diversified that theological disciplines are no longer able to converse meaningfully with one another. Each discipline has its own methodology and language, and loses its capacity to reflect on a common goal and concern in contributing to forming effective ministers.



Although distance delivery has great potential to expand participation and increase enrolment, the implementation of a distance education theological programme creates unique obstacles and parameters. The literature provides substantial evidence to support the value of distance learning as an effective alternative to face-to-face instruction (Pallof & Pratt 2007). In particular, Russel (1999) reviewed 355 studies to determine whether the course delivery medium did not make a difference, which he identified as the *no significant difference* phenomenon. This research has quieted those who viewed online education as inferior to traditional face-to-face education. However, the research is not conclusive on whether distance education or online courses provide personal or spiritual formation.³

For many in Christian higher education, relationally modelling Christ-likeness in the classroom is considered a primary means and evidence of integrating faith and learning (Hughes 2005). The classroom offers a more immediate setting for such commitment: non-verbal student cues, the opportunity for students to learn from one another, the faculty member's ability to deal with possibly threatening questions whilst continuing to model a mature faith stance. This is not to say that formation always takes place because how this happens exactly is contested (Graham 2002) but one can assure the process to some extent. When the face-to-face personal dimension is removed in an online course, concern remains whether the spiritual formation of students can be promoted. As Abrami and Bures (1996:39) state that social and intellectual isolation are two course-related factors that may contribute to the weaknesses in distance education. The challenge of facilitating spiritual formation in a climate that relies on 'text-based and largely asynchronous exchanges between physically isolated individuals' (Dawson 2004:77) raises concerns amongst Christian educators. The issue of separate locations of instructor and students is an obstacle because the concept of learning in isolation and detachment runs counter to Christian nurturing and formation. The lack of real, as opposed to virtual, interaction between faculty and students, is a systemic and structural problem necessarily associated with distance learning. These issues are of fundamental importance for they reflect the deeper convictions of theologians that distance education may not be a suitable medium for spiritual formation.

Theological education has typically considered distance education as inferior, often basing its criticism on the theological grounds that involve the nature of theology, the embodied character of learning and the more pragmatic difficulties of standards of ministerial formation expected of those preparing for ministry (Patterson 1996; Reissner 1999; Kelsey 2002). Included in the criticism of online education is the fact that theological education in an online context is driven by pragmatics and that theological institutions gravitate towards current technologies without due consideration of the theological issues (Delamarter 2004).

3. In South Africa the focus on scholarship and research is important to note in the discussion on formation, since the academic model used in universities is the model which is carried into distance education. Many providers of distance education would be public universities where faith and learning are kept separate. Denominational seminaries at this stage are not major players in distance education.

One of the major challenges in providing formation in distance education is student support; the availability and provision of resources (Larsen 2001); technical help with the learning environment; and administrative and personal support (Graham 2002:228). There is still a feeling amongst certain religious institutions that they should move slowly in supporting such efforts:

until quality course design has been demonstrated, until a great number of primary resource materials for theological disciplines are electronically accessible and when the medium can prove that interactivity is possible and effective. (Cannell 1999:54)

This merits consideration whether a formational mandate could exist for distance education. This article explores the various theological and pedagogical arguments that challenge the possibility of ministerial formation and demonstrates how formation could be possible as seen from its current practice in the distance-learning environment.

Theological arguments

The question at hand is whether formation can take place through distance-education courses in a disembodied context. Many theologians argue that spiritual formation and nurture must include bodily presence (Carroll *et al.* 1997; Kelsey 2002). The basic paradigm of learning in the Christian tradition is that of a highly personal and immediate relationship between master and pupil. The reliability of this mentor-student model exists in tension with models of distance education which stress learning as self-directed or of a cooperative venture. The issue of the theological appropriateness of technology as well is rooted in a sacramental consciousness that appreciates the embodied nature of Christian life and its implications for teaching and learning. If the teaching and learning experiences presuppose a level of embodiment or sacramentality, is it theologically appropriate to design courses that depend on the virtual presence of learners to each other? How can a collection of disembodied voices in an online threaded discussion function as the living body of Christ? Kelsey (2002) questions whether there is a theological basis for online education and whether it is consistent with a theological anthropology. He wonders whether online education fosters a spiritualised and dualistic view of human beings as 'spiritual machines' that undermines the Christian understandings of human beings as personal bodies whose material body is affirmed by divine creation and incarnation (Kelsey 2002:2–9). Gresham (2006:24) however, argues for 'divine pedagogy' as a model for online education. He refutes the claim of Kelsey (2002) and others that online education as theological education is not theologically valid based on dualism and disembodiment. Gresham (2006:26) argues that the pedagogy of incarnation allows for 'communion' and that physical face-to-face community is not required since the Spirit is active in forming and shaping us into Christ-likeness. Hess (2005) also challenges the assumption that online education is a disembodied experience, whilst typical classroom learning is an embodied experience. She argues that the contextualisation of learning in a student's home environment is incarnational and embodies learning



compared with the artificial and more abstract world of the classroom (Hess 2005:33). Richard Nysse (2011:17–19) agrees that ministry is embodied but then asserts that ministry does not need to occur in front of his physical body. He insists that the contrasts made between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ is a false dichotomy and argues that the digital revolution in teaching and learning should be understood in terms of language and culture more than a generational difference.

Added to the issue of the embodied character of learning is the one of community – where the residential community is viewed as the primary avenue for learning and formation. Dykstra (1997:170) draws on MacIntyre’s definition of practices (1985:186–187) as related to narrative and tradition in the service of virtue rooted in community-based practices of discipleship. Miroslav Volf (1998:251) notes that beliefs are logically prior, but chronologically, practices often come first. By being attracted to and habituated in a set of practices, students embrace the set of beliefs that sustains these practices and that is subscribed in them. Hence the design of learning opportunities in formation include encounters with theological truths *and* the opportunity to engage in related practices. Furthermore, these opportunities help students to reflect on this inter-relationship of beliefs and practices because it promotes not only knowing about God, but knowing God (Marshall 2009). For these reasons the classic paradigm of theological education is believed to be the best setting for ministry preparation namely, (1) full immersion for at least three years in a (2) residential programme in which senior members of a community instruct, inspire and inform junior members primarily through (3) lecture-based pedagogies and where students learn the art of theological reflection through (4) face-to-face community discourse (5) library research and (6) writing (Delamarter 2004:135). Community is seen as spatially situated and defined in fixed physical terms. In order for spiritual formation to be fostered in students, there must be a physical community in which students interact with other students, staff and faculty. So how does one form future pastors for ministry without having them interact with others? Mentoring and discipleship are of paramount importance in the community, and how is this to be provided in distance education?

The above assumes that the residential community is a closely-knit one in which students live and share life together. There seems to be a fundamental link between face-to-face encounters and community building. This is a reality in Africa as the idea of *ubuntu* [humanism] is regarded as fundamental to African socio-ethical thought that explains the communal rootedness and interdependence of persons and underscores the importance of human relationships (Higgs *et al.* 2000). In theological terms, face-to-face interaction is what incarnation is all about (Delamarter 2005:138). However, the reality is that the campus is no longer the central place where students’ fill their lives with activities – hence their situation complicates the task of creating supportive student communities (Palka 2004:1). Cannell may be correct in

stating that traditional face-to-face courses do not guarantee community any more than distance learning courses (1999:6). The defining issue in distance education is the distance, and yet the reality is that most theological schools have no longer much control or even connection with the lives of students outside of their presence in class. There are at least as many external variables that influence the development of students as there are campus ones, and these variables need to be acknowledged and education should be designed in a way that utilises rather than ignores them. Educational systems are a part of a larger social context within which students and faculty are shaped and developed. This is true for all students, but distance education has brought the question into high priority.

Pedagogical concerns

The central pedagogical concern is whether and how the use of technology contributes to a deeper student-learning environment necessary for formation. Most educators agree that deep learning, which involves values, attitudes and beliefs, does not occur unless the affective domain is also involved (Martin & Briggs 1986). Courses in formation should provide content which builds on the students’ knowledge of the subject area, their familiarity with critical opinions and approaches, their ability to analyse and interpret from a theological perspective and their awareness of what and how they are learning and changing. Developing new perspectives and increasing self-awareness are part of the complex competency in theological formation. However it must be said that these non-cognitive outcomes become extremely difficult to define and access.⁴ As Patterson suggests a weakness in distance education research is that it focuses on educational outcomes relating to the cognitive domain and gives relatively less attention to the affective domain (1996:66). The difficulty of measurement in diverse domains like theological education has meant that identifying criteria and defining effectiveness are highly contested (Graham 2002:228).

Another pedagogical concern is how the medium is reshaping roles and relationships in the teaching and learning process (Esselman 2005:138). Distance education as a medium of delivery – particularly in its print form in Africa – also has the potential to exert an authoritarian influence on the learner that might be detrimental to the growth and development of self (Le Cornu 2001:9). This is based on the idea that theological truth when presented as objective truth or propositional truth is attributed an inherent authority which directly influences the learner. The degree of control is often heightened in distance learning as course content and the presentation of material is as educators feel it should be. Once course material is committed to print, it is difficult for a course to be changed quickly according to the needs

⁴An example is the extent to which ‘spirituality’ can be assessed. Commentators like Reisz (2003) have highlighted that assessing an assignment in a course is quite different from making value judgements on a person’s formation – whether spiritual, social, emotional which will be shaped across the wider curriculum for ministerial training. The issue of appropriate assessment and its limits needs to be flagged as it is an area which is more challenging and more difficult to do appropriately than assessing written assignments by typical academic criteria.



and circumstances of students. Distance learners often have fewer opportunities to assess the validity of the content than face-to-face students with access to a library and other students, which results in learners placing greater authority on the content of a course than it might actually demand. Students simply enter a relationship with the written material rather than the teacher. When considering the authoritarian aspect of distance learning, Le Cornu (2001) suggests that much depends on how the student views and uses the learning material. Positively, this form of learning allows for the acceptance or rejection of learning material which cultivates autonomy that is part of the process in developing self-autonomy.

Distance education as a 'cold' medium faces a challenge in creating ways of interaction that not only focus on the intellectual exchange of ideas but also allow for the expression of more personalised reactions to course content. Closely related is the concern about cheating and the possibility for a student to warp his or her true self in an online persona and hide from lecturers and fellow students (Delamarter 2005). This is especially prevalent in an environment devoid of access to non-verbal clues that make up much of classroom communication. However, some proponents believe that students have found ways to hide in any and all media (Palooff & Pratt 2007; White 2006:312). Students will need to balance the benefits of openness or transparency and the security risks of broadly sharing information that is difficult to retrieve once it is in cyberspace. Educators will need to establish new criteria for evaluating the fluidity of personal boundaries in social networks that inevitably affect the willingness to be appropriately vulnerable in formation for ministry.

One of the troubling elements in distance study is that it comes at a time when theological education has an almost unanimous commitment towards the necessity of incorporating diversity as a foundational value. Attempting formation in a multicultural community (Linder 1997) has its challenges of ethnocentrism and prejudice and formation processes must take the personal and contextual into account with equal seriousness. Considering our political history in South Africa, theological institutions especially want to be intentionally cross-cultural and to incorporate multicultural diversity into the student body. Such diversity has tremendous potential for enriching learning, but in Africa where the learner is dependent on packaged course materials, students may not have access to much diversity (Patterson 1996:60). In the online environment as well, educators express concern about whether the distinctive sociology can be captured: the particular ethos of the school, patterns and rituals, the collective personalities and core values (Delamarter 2005). All these issues affect or express their distinctive way of being, which ultimately shapes the student, and this is lost in the distance environment. By the same token, can distance learning facilitate the delicate and crucial process of social change? Le Cornu (2003:14) suggests

that online learning accompanies a more profound societal shift towards individualism rather than provoking it.

Current practice of formation in distance education

Programmatic approaches to formation issues in distance education are in their infancy. However a growing swell of research is becoming available from the United States of America (USA) as distance education, whether in the form of fully online or hybrid courses, is becoming a central component in academic programmes in Bible colleges, universities and seminaries (Allen & Seaman 2004). Le Cornu (2003:18) suggests that the distance-learning mode of education naturally lends itself to the formational mandate on account of its learner-centred pedagogical approach.

Most practitioners in seminaries noted that distance education is best built through the combination of face-to-face *and* online learning opportunities (Delamarter & Brunner 2005; Esselman 2005; Reissner 1999:90; Weigel 2002:60–126). This begins with initial contact sessions and electronic communication which serves to sustain and build on the campus experience. This model blends the best of traditional on-campus teaching and learning with online or technology-mediated resources, emphasising depth as well as access. Weigel (2002:5) proposes this hybrid model known as the 'bricks and clicks' approach, designed around the pedagogical goal of developing what he calls 'deep learning'. Studies show that these hybrid forms of teaching and learning can be more effective than either face-to-face or online alone. For example, Twigg (2001) provides case studies of thirteen hybrid programmes detailing the ways in which these programmes are developing particular strategies for excellence in teaching and learning, student service and so on. The issue has progressed to 'what part of which course, that is, what learning objectives for the programme need to be handled face-to-face and which can be done online' (Delamarter 2004:138). It would seem that formation could be possible in the online environment using written and recorded lectures, power-point presentations, blogs, video clips, websites, online discussion groups, web-based chapel, new technologies like Blackboard or WebCT and the creation of communities of practice (Delamarter 2005).

At this point in the discussion, it is the 'where' and 'how' rather than the *substance* of formation that is currently undergoing change as approaches to formation are being developed for distance education (Delamarter 2005; Graham 2002). Many of these barriers to adoption and concerns about design, resource materials and interactivity have been mitigated by technological and pedagogical progress in distance education over the past five years. The discussion about technology in theological education has moved beyond the instrumental use of technology to what we are *becoming* with technology (Hefner 2003). There is a tension between technology as the enemy of nature and technology as the 'pivotal point in the process of making ourselves into new beings' (Hefner 2003:4). Hess (2005:31) suggests that in



integrating digital technologies into theological pedagogies we have to think of our work as a process of cultural intervention. Technology triggers new ways of doing things, which in turns triggers a new way of thinking about our world and our relationship to it.⁵ Eventually not only how we teach will change but the people preparing for religious leadership will be shaped by the technology itself (Hess 2005:31).

In using technology, Patterson (1996:68–69) has articulated what might be considered a first principle of good practice here: it is pedagogy that should direct the selection and use of technology in the classroom, and not vice versa. For deep learning to happen with some degree of success in the distance education environment, interactive methodologies are required. These could involve the use of hybrid or blended learning models that include face-to-face elements and distance technologies. In a study that compared traditional classrooms, blended, and fully online learning environments, Ravoï and Jordan (2004) reported that blended learning can produce a stronger sense of community amongst students than either traditional or fully online courses. For example, the use of the threaded discussion boards can be a place of constructive and rich theological reflection were students have time to think and craft their responses (Ascough 2002:21). The amount of exchange and interaction between students in a threaded discussion can exceed what is possible with the geographical and temporal restrictions of a classroom (Delamarter 2005). The expectation is that all learners will contribute to the discussion question that is a positive, where in the traditional classroom some students tend to dominate whilst others 'hide'. Esselman (2005:148) suggests that these hybrid courses encourage interactivity between learners where they find themselves in charge, mutually responsible for their learning and accountable to one another. These discussion groups are utilised as the integrative focal point of each course. However, integrating the different areas of ministerial learning remains a challenge, for example, the development of practical skills for Christian ministry (White 2006). Online learning ought to be integrated with on-site mentoring to provide effective training in liturgy, educational practices, counselling and other aspects of ministry that exceed the written word.

The extent to which people experience community online is a matter of debate. The question is whether these are authentic communities or quasi communities. However, there is general agreement that cyberspace is playing a decisive role in bringing together diverse people, bound not by geography but by shared interest. The explosive growth of social media such as Facebook and Twitter is an example of the need for people to develop social community. Students in this internet-savvy generation place a high value on relationships and community. They are naturally attracted to the combination of technology and the potential for learning in an online community.

5.The modern view or set of assumptions is that technology is radically separate from us. The postmodern and virtual episteme suggests that technology exists in a social space with us and that we co-create our lives with technology (Palloff & Pratt 2007:38).

To support the notion of community in the online environment, Ravoï (2002) argues that when dialogue is increased, transactional distance is reduced. Transactional distance is a psychological and communication space between learner and instructor (Moore 1991:2). In order to deal with this concern about the quality of person-to-person interaction in the online environment, Shore (2007:92) explores the idea of social presence in the learning environment. For her it is the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication (Shore 2007:92). Dron (2006) argues that social software can create a learning space that is rich and interconnected with clusters, social groupings and two-way links combining to create an emergent and intricate structured community. Similarly, Dede (2007) states that 'when we use "mediated" communication in moderation, the convenience, efficiency and timeliness of interaction seem reasonable benefits to compensate for some loss of psychosocial presence'. Campbell (2005) contends that online Christian communities do indeed reflect the following characteristics: care, relationship, value, connection and shared faith. Hence it is not a matter of whether online courses have the potential as a means of engaging spiritual formation but to what degree that potential can be realised (Campbell 2005:181–188).

In establishing learning communities online, Hines *et al.* (2009:38) suggest that essential guidelines for online interaction are necessary to promote genuine dialogue that challenges assumptions, affirms insights and asks clarifying questions under intentional direction from the teacher. It is essential that process factors such as safety, emotional accessibility between members of the learning community, integrity and authenticity be established as core values or the structural factors will be only minimally effective (Maddix & Estep 2010:431). These process factors are especially needed in the online venue because of the absence of face-to-face contact. In this way through online learning, trusting relationships and a commitment to transformative relationships can be fostered (Delamarter & Brunner 2005:148). This counters the claim that technology inevitably isolates its users and depersonalises the learning experience and thus is inappropriate for theological reflection.

The online teaching environment can also change the social dynamics of the class around class, race and gender issues (Ascough 2002:19). Esselman (2005:155) suggests that it is possible to design online learning to leverage the differences that exist between students, by intentionally creating diverse working groups within a course. This calls for training in online communications skills and ongoing discussions of the impact social and ecclesial location, gender and hermeneutical approaches have on interpretation (Ravoï, Baker & Cox 2008). It is also an opportunity for voices that are seldom heard in the classroom, as a result of disability, temperament or perceived marginalisation to be present online (Esselman 2005:155).

Besides establishing virtual communities amongst students separated by physical distance, it is important to note



that distance students are embedded in their own local communities. Students do not leave the community that has formed them to this point in order to move into a theological institution for three to four years. By leaving the student in his or her current place of ministry, educators claim they are conducting theological education in a manner that is completely contextual (Delamater & Brunner 2005:162; Hess 2005). Students move back and forth between learning and applying in ways that are immediate and seamless. However, the connection to the local community cannot be assumed, but online courses can allow groups of students to form communities of practice as one of the learning strategies of a course, thereby meeting the need for community and at the same time encouraging integration of learning (Esselman 2005:148).

The quality of any formational programme in theological education depends not on the technology involved in its delivery systems but on the involvement of faculty. According to Gorham (1988), the best instructional motivator and support for both cognitive and affective goals appear to be interaction with the teacher. Daloz (1987:86) believes that the educational experience for adults becomes a search for meaning. He places a great deal of emphasis on individualised mentoring as a requirement of distance learning, and his students report significant affective changes in their understanding of the world and of themselves. Thus, for effective distance education, the individual instructor must shift from being a content provider to a content facilitator (Reissner 1999:100). Unfortunately theological education is not populated by faculty members with extensive backgrounds in educational methodology. Most academics responsible for the development of both curricular and instruction need better understanding of the paths and processes of adult development: of how persons develop identities, interact to create meaning and experience deep learning.

Education at its best moves the student from one state of understanding to another and that process will necessarily include times of disequilibrium. At such times, when the learner's emotional state is unsettled, and particularly when dealing with matters of faith, it is incumbent on the faculty to serve as a monitor, guide and reassuring presence. This involves an ethical component to the interaction required for formation over distance (Patterson 1996:68–69). The commitment of a theological faculty to educate must include a commitment to contain and offer support during such disruptions. Also understanding and appreciating the life circumstances of the learner is essential if distance programmes are to meet the formational needs of students.

Conclusion

Theological educators have objections to the idea of ministerial formation in distance education for various reasons: theological arguments – from theologies of community and embodiment and presence to the pedagogical argument 'this does not meet our standards for good or appropriate

pedagogy', to the sociological argument 'there is a set of social dynamics that cannot be captured in this medium'. The debate about whether a theological argument can be made for a holistic view of human anthropology in distance education will continue. However, some scholars indicate that community can occur in an online context and that the social interaction of presence can replicate the face-to-face human interaction of traditional course offerings.

As mentioned above, given the nature of theological education, it would seem that a balance between face-to-face communication and the use of interactive technologies is desirable for ministerial formation. As technology advances, so does the prospect of developing and incorporating online education not only as a possibility but also a necessity. Educators can motivate and provide support for the personal, spiritual and ministerial growth of the student. Doing so at a distance calls for new forms and efforts.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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