The Potential of Digital Media in Teaching Biblical and Jewish Studies

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Digital media is arguably the most underused arrow in the pedagogical quiver, since, if approached creatively, it has the potential of slaying the twin giants of student disinterest and disengagement. This is because the online environment is exactly where today's students congregate socially, and, arguably, communicate the most. Not surprisingly, the online classroom is destined to occupy a growing role in the overall direction of education moving forward. Biblical and Jewish studies must adapt to and get ahead of the trend by embracing online teaching, in order to enhance learning outcomes. This study will address the extent to which new modalities of online video instruction can and should be part of our overall pedagogical transformation.

We should note at the outset that the demand for online courses is expanding rapidly. Properly defined, an online course is one in which at least 80% of the instruction (i.e. seat time) takes place in a virtual environment. Statistically, we are told that roughly one third of the college age population of the United States undertakes at least one online course in any given academic year.[1] At the University of Central Florida (UCF), 39.58% of credit hours are now undertaken

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[1] I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Grade Change: Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Needham, MA: Babson College Survey Research Group, 2014), 15.

online.[2] Moreover, 81.33% of our undergraduates and 60.65% of our graduate students have taken at least one online course.[3]

When it comes to learning outcomes and pedagogical techniques, online or not, we should, I submit, ask above all whether student engagement is seriously addressed. Unfortunately, for many students, disengagement is such a reality that attending class seems like little more than an exercise in futility. It might indeed be argued that simply assigning a text to read in an online format is in fact more effective than traditional classroom learning. We should nonetheless ask whether student engagement in reading assignments is actually higher than in face-to-face class meetings. Moreover, in what proportion of the assigned readings are students actually becoming "engaged"?

The elusive dream of every professor is that 100% of their lectures be fully attended, with each student paying serious attention to each. Unfortunately, that is far from the case. The "standard" nature of attendance requirements appearing in syllabus after syllabus are evidence of the instructor's constant struggle with absenteeism at the postsecondary level. Another common faculty complaint is that those students who do attend class are often simply not paying attention. A disappointingly large proportion of students report feeling academically disengaged in recent

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[2] Center for Distributed Learning, *Access, quality, and efficiency through online learning: Academic year 2014-2015* (Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida, 2015).

[3] Figures combine numbers from fully online, blended, and lecture-capture courses. Center for Distributed Learning, "Online learning at UCF" (presentation, 2016 New Faculty Orientation, Orlando, Florida, August 2016).

surveys.[4] Student use of electronic devices ranging from cell phones to tablets has in recent years further compounded the problem. It is difficult for an instructor to know who is taking notes and who is using technology for activities unrelated to class, spawning much debate about whether these devices should be permitted at all in the classroom.[5]

Given such realities, it is not difficult to understand why faculty may be equally reticent to teach in traditional classrooms as students are to attend them. The idealistic young instructor all too often becomes the jaded senior scholar, who finds "better" things to do than teach disaffected students. From this perspective, eliminating face-to-face class sessions altogether and transforming the instructor's primary role into one of mediation and administration may be welcomed as a solution. The learning outcomes achieved through reading assignments and written interaction, including online discussions and electronically submitted papers, can be as high or higher than what is gleaned from traditional classroom settings, resulting in professors and students who are reasonably content with the learning outcomes achieved via online instruction.[6]

Not surprisingly, objections have been raised by some educators (e.g. Prof. Zev Garber, Los Angeles Valley College, another author in this multi-part article) who resist converting their

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[4] National Survey of Student Engagement, *A fresh look at student engagement: Annual results 2013* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2013).

[5] Bernard McCoy, "Digital Distractions in the Classroom: Student Classroom Use of Digital Devices for Non-Class Related Purposes" Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications, Paper 71 (University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 2013); Fang-Yi Flora Wei, Y. Ken Wang and Michael Klausner, "Rethinking College Students' Self-Regulation and Sustained Attention: Does Text Messaging During Class Influence Cognitive Learning?," *Communication Education,* 61, no. 3 (2012): 185–204.

[6] Tuan Nguyen, "The effectiveness of online learning: Beyond no significant difference and future horizons," *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 11, no. 2 (2015): 309–319.

courses to the online platform because they fear losing the ability to communicate what they want to teach in a direct manner. While I recognize the validity of such issues, I submit that the technology available is not being utilized to its fullest potential and that we now have at our disposal the digital tools to impact young student minds as never before. Moreover, a growing body of research indicates that online instruction does in fact produce learning outcomes that are at least as good as in traditional classrooms.[7] Indeed, the lack of statistically significant results from empirical studies on online learning has been dubbed the "no significant difference phenomenon."[8] Scholars noted the incredible potential of online learning technologies *years* ago and have been arguing ever since that educators must not settle for mediocrity in online pedagogy.[9] By facilitating the creation and use of online affordances such as review games, digital scavenger hunts, and interactive discussion boards, universities are making a substantial investment in positive online experiences as well as learning outcomes.

When it comes to the integration of video instruction into online courses, instructional designers and media producers at our university warn against presenting lengthy audio-visual material of this kind. Rather, they work with faculty to tool video segments into professionally produced, high-quality, focused presentations that generally run 5-7 minutes in length (with a limited number of exceptions). These university-produced presentations consist primarily of

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[7] Nguyen, 2015; Karen McCutcheon, Maria Lohan, Marian Traynor, and Daphne Martin, "A systematic review evaluating the impact of online or blended learning vs. face-to-face learning of clinical skills in undergraduate nurse education," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 71, no. 2 (2015): 255–270.

[8] Thomas L. Russell, *The no significant difference phenomenon: As reported in 355 research reports, summaries and papers* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University, 1999).

[9] Carol A. Twigg, *Innovations in online learning: Moving beyond no significant difference* (New York: The Pew Learning and Technology Program, 2001).

course introductions, video interviews with guests, recordings of specific procedures, and demonstrations "out in the field," etc. These, however, do not comprise a major portion of the online class, and are not geared to delivering a significant portion of the course content. In most instances they are effectively "supplemental" material.

In my case, I have attempted to "pioneer" the development of an entirely new form of online "presence" for my "virtual students," namely, the production of full documentary-style video presentations (20-25 minutes in length and utilizing television-quality production values) posted in each weekly "module" of course instruction.[10] These are coupled with short but regular online quizzes, which in turn provide obvious motivation to learn actively the contents of the material covered. This approach also allows the student to review the presentation as desired, potentially gaining much more than from traditional classroom lectures.

To measure the efficacy of video-augmented instruction, with the help of our university's Center for Distributed Learning, my research collaborators and I sent an anonymous survey to all students enrolled in my two online courses, "History of the Holocaust" and "Jewish People in Antiquity," receiving a total of 27 completed responses from a possible 110, a response rate of 24.5%. The 8-item survey consisted primarily of statements to which students indicated their level of agreement, disagreement, or interference. A few additional items asked students to indicate the frequencies of certain behaviors and, finally, their preferred course format.

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[10] These involve a good bit of theatrics on the part of the professor, including the impersonation of historical characters vocalizing the original Hebrew text, with English subtitles.

Student responses (see appendix) indicated a high level of satisfaction with the video lecture format, with 96% of respondents selecting "Strongly Agree" to the statement "The video lectures in this course were effective in helping me understand the material." Respondents overwhelmingly felt that watching the documentary-style video presentations was an engaging experience, strengthened their critical thinking skills, and would help them remember the material for a longer period of time.

Interestingly, a majority of respondents reported utilizing aspects of online technology that simply cannot be replicated in the traditional classroom. None of the respondents reported that they *never* paused the videos to take notes or to reflect on the content, etc., with 96% indicating that they *often* do so and 4% that they *sometimes* utilize this feature. Moreover, only 7% of respondents reported *never* watching these videos more than once, while 41% reported that they *sometimes* viewed them more than once and 52% indicated that they *often* watched them more than once.

It is clear that undergraduate students understand the technology well and use it to their advantage in online courses. It can even be asserted that "virtual courses" hold an advantage over their traditional counterparts in terms of the general "teaching context." Imagine a student raising a hand in class and asking the instructor to "pause" or "hold on" for a moment to allow the student to finish making a note of what had just been said, or a student appearing at office hours with a request for the instructor to repeat the entire lecture from the previous day, week, or month to afford a better understanding of the material. While these are rather laughable notions in a

traditional setting, in the virtual classroom, they are "standard operating procedure," allowing and encouraging student reflection and a deeper understanding of the content.

Nonetheless, one common complaint of online students is the lack of a feeling a "connection" to the instructor. This is understandable as well as difficult to overcome, given the usual format of online courses. Even including a discussion board merely involves posting the instructor's name next to written remarks. To be sure, it takes a fair amount of writing skill to convey passion, empathy, and other emotions that result in the student feeling respected and encouraged in the educational journey. Happily, the majority of the students in these two online courses reported feeling educationally "connected" to the professor, something that instructors often report difficulty in accomplishing in virtual environments. Nearly all responding students—96%—selected "Strongly Agree" to the statement "Watching the videos is an engaging experience." Likewise, the statement, "In this course, I feel educationally connected to the instructor," garnered a significant mean response of 4.77 on a scale of (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. This suggests that these documentary-style video presentations helped to convey personal passion for the subject material and to connect on an intellectual level with the students, engaging them with meaningful content.

Conclusion

This preliminary study suggests that documentary-style video presentation of course content (well beyond short, supplemental video vignettes) has serious pedagogical potential. In any case, further investigation with larger response rates are needed to acquire more nuanced data about student engagement. For example, what specific aspects of these videos prove to be the most engaging,

and why? Can these features be isolated and incorporated in other types of content presentation or perhaps in completely different subject areas altogether? We look forward to extending and building upon this pilot study.

In sum, by enhancing online course materials with full-length documentary-style video, the subject-matter content is presented in a way that is engaging and leads to improved retention. Knowledge, like any other "product" in the twenty-first century marketplace, must be "sold," and today's students must be looked at as our customers and consumers. It is a truism in the business world that (as Steve Jobs also pointed out), the key to customer retention is creating a memorable experience.[11] If the use of superior production values in creating truly memorable online video content can create such experiences, as the demonstrated student feedback indicates, then the investment in time and resources will certainly have been vindicated.

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[11] Jason Hiner, "Steve Jobs' 100-year legacy: Humanizing technology," *TechRepublic*, 2012, http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/tech-sanity-check/steve-jobs-100-year-legacy-humanizing-technology/.

Appendix: Survey Results

The video lectures in this course were effective in helping me understand the course material. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Strongly Agree	26	96
· Agree	1	4
· Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	0
· Disagree	0	0
· Strongly Disagree	0	0
When compared to other course formats, learning with video lectures will help me remember the material for a longer period of time. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Strongly Agree	20	74
· Agree	6	22
· Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	4
· Disagree	0	0
· Strongly Disagree	0	0
Watching the videos is an engaging experience. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Strongly Agree	26	96
· Agree	0	0
· Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	4

· Disagree	0	0
· Strongly Disagree	0	0
The video lectures in this course have strengthened my critical thinking skills. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Strongly Agree	17	63
· Agree	7	36
· Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	11
· Disagree	0	0
· Strongly Disagree	0	0
In this course, I feel educationally connected to the instructor. (N=27)		
· Response	N	%
· Strongly Agree	22	81
· Agree	4	15
· Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	4
· Disagree	0	0
· Strongly Disagree	0	0
I usually watch the course videos more than once. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Often	14	52
· Sometimes	11	41

· Never	2	7

I often pause the videos to take notes, reflect on the content, etc. (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Often	26	96
· Sometimes	1	4
· Never	0	0

Which of the following course formats is most effective for your learning style? (N=27)		
Response	n	%
· Traditional Face-to-Face	2	7
· Traditional Online (readings & discussion forums)	1	4
· Online with Video "Lectures" (like this course)	15	56
· Blended	9	33
· Lecture Capture	0	0

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