

Digital Instruction in the Religious Studies Classroom Summary Essay

Peter Zaas

Dept. of Religious Studies, Siena College

As the contributors to this collection demonstrate, technological innovation is part-and-parcel of Religious Studies pedagogy, in Hebrew and Biblical Studies, in Judaic and Holocaust Studies, really throughout all the Religious Studies sub-curricula. Innovations in the reconfigured classroom, hybrid, flipped, or fully online, and innovations in the media of instruction all are as fully at home in the fields of Religious Studies as they are in any other pedagogical area. As in the other humanistic fields whose instructors expand and delineate their students' imaginations, Religious Studies is at the forward edge of innovation in the methods it uses.

This is true today and it is true of the field since its inception. Religious Studies, both in practice and in instruction, has always made the best use of the best technology to communicate its both its principles and its data. From the new educational ideas of the Pharisees, adapted by both Jesus and by his first chroniclers to express their own religious ideas, to the media innovation of Christian scribes, who invented the codex medium to facilitate their missionizing (itself a form of education), to the authors and publishers of Rabbinic argumentation, which developed a new format, akin to modern hypertext, to present their flow of legal and aggadic insight. That Religious Studies fully embraces technological innovation is itself not an innovation at all.

Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 30, Number 5, 2017

ISSN- 0111-8854

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The essays in this collection demonstrate some of the possibilities of applying new technologies to old religions in the classroom, although they in no way exhaust that description. Two of the essays, by Kenneth Hanson and by Roberta Sabbath, demonstrate ways in which Religious Studies can infuse new life into the potentially stilted world of online instruction. The essay by Drew Billings asks technology to meet the needs of the learning styles of contemporary undergraduate students, and recommends the podcast as a valuable educational medium. Zev Garber's essay reminds us that Religious Education is not merely about the transfer of data from the instructor to the student, but involves a deeper commitment to helping the student confront the tremendum, and understand its role in the life of the world.

All of our contributors distinguish between the curricula they offer and the technology they employ in delivering it, and all have some experience in a variety of technologies. All have their preferences, and all have their praxis, dictated in part by their preferences, and in part by the requirements of their institutions. All are honored and experienced teachers teaching religious studies/holocaust studies/Hebrew/biblical studies in primarily secular institutions. Although Professor Hanson (assisted in his essay by Emily Johnson)¹, clearly has discovered a form of educational technology, video instruction, that makes excellent use of his pronounced chops both as an historian and as an actor, he makes it clear that his "experiment in online pedagogy," was occasioned more by the requirements of his university than in his desire to create the (marvelous) video courses he has in fact created. Drew Billings, whose preferred digital format is the audio

¹ PhD laureate in Texts and Technology from the University of Central Florida.

podcast, chooses to emphasize that format in his pedagogy out of his research-based conclusion that contemporary students are best reached aurally, and at locations of their choosing. Roberta Sabbath developed an interest in online education because she wanted “to be a discriminating producer of cyber output...and cyber education,”² in other words (if I am not distorting her meaning), to be the kind of teacher who meets the needs of her students.

Zev Garber takes a different approach to technology, but not to the needs of his students. Both the material he teaches and the undergraduate students he teaches it to impel him to involve the students in an encounter with a *maggid*. Garber interprets his material through both sight and sound, visually, in the example he provides, by wearing his *tallit* and holding, if not smoking, Martin Niemöller’s pipe³, and aurally, with notable vocal control and an occasional sound-effect involving the tabletop. Garber has fittingly chosen as the centerpiece of his essay here the Israelites’ affirmation of Exod 24:7, *נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע*, “we shall do and we shall hearken”: His pedagogy is active; his students are engaged; they act and they hear, perhaps in that order.

A handful of essays do not constitute a handbook on digital technology, but these essays are suggestive of some ways that very good teachers strive to meet the needs of their students, needs which are changing as the students’ digital environment changes, the ways in which they both receive and act on information. Whether she or he is teaching in a conventional or an online classroom, hybrid or flipped, the skillful teacher finds the best way to engage the students’

² P. 1 of her essay.

³ A pipe which curiously makes its way into Ken Hanson’s contribution to these essays as well.

imagination. The best way differs from student to student and from teacher to teacher. Where Garber finds his strength in his physical presence, Billings finds his in his voice, and creates podcasts. Hanson is often Sherlock Holmes in the video illustrations he has created to enhance otherwise unadorned online courses, Sabbath offers both her life and her professional experience, along with a profound knowledge of the learning needs of the various types of students she teaches.

Should pedagogical technology be transparent or translucent? Should the instructor discuss how she has made the technological choices she has made? This is a question that is answered in the affirmative in Billing's contribution to these essays. He specifically connects the podcasts he champions with properties of the texts he teaches, specifically the fact that they were performed orally and that they were *performed* orally, not merely read out loud.⁴ Billings writes

Well, first of all, we need to translate biblical texts back into sound and engage students in this process. Many have gone so far as to claim that discussion of performative elements need to take center stage in our discussion of the sources with our students, which could depend on podcasts as a prime medium introducing the oral dynamics of primary sources to [them].⁵

⁴ Here Billings pays homage to David Rhoads, whom he cites.

⁵ Billings, p. 5.

Billings not only engages students by exposing them to the performative nature of the texts he teaches, he engages them by encouraging students to make podcasts for each other, a concrete example of *נעשה ונשמע* .

Hanson, too, emphasizes the performative nature of the religious studies curriculum, except that here he is the quintessential performer. Whether in deerstalker and calabash as Sherlock Holmes or in homburg and briar as Martin Niemöller, Hanson performs in character for the students who are taking his course, commenting upon historical events or re-enacting them. Students are largely passive in this process, but surely more deeply engaged than if they were observing a conventional lecture or worse, experiencing a text-only online course.

All of the contributors to these essays respond differently to the dictum Garber keeps returning to, We shall do and we shall listen, *נעשה ונשמע* . They all respond differently, but all of their responses pay attention to the core dicta of any good teaching, digital or analogue, new wineskin or old: All of them take the learning styles and needs of their students as the foremost determinant of what form of pedagogy to use. Although they, like all contemporary teachers, have a wide selection of pedagogical tools in their kits, they have provided some clues as to how to select the proper tool for the proper job. Ancient teachers, too, selected from among the pedagogical technologies and methods available to them, choosing to teach in parables or in plain speech, to speak from a mountain or on a plain, encouraging their students to stand on one foot or two. At a time when the Sages were comfortable with learning in *zugot*, Christian scribes were taking

Mentalities/Mentalités Volume 30, Number 5, 2017

ISSN- 0111-8854

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advantage of new information-storage technology, codices, which suited their need to compare texts rapidly using portable devices.

As I hope our contributors would agree (and as I believe Garber shows positively) old forms of instruction can be new, just as new forms of instruction can be old. All forms of instruction need to be examined and re-examined so that they can meet the changing needs of our students and the institutions that employ us. These four essays are only suggestive of some possible ways to undertake this examination and re-examination, but they demonstrate how good teachers can make use of the tools—the new and the old tools—available to them, to engage the students on a vital, pertinent, and lamentably under-appreciated item in the modern undergraduate curriculum.

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