Annie Blazer, College of William and Mary, and Brandi Denison, University of North Florida

Annie Blazer is an assistant professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary. Her scholarship examines post-war Evangelical Christians and popular culture. She is currently completing her first monograph, Faith on the Field: Sports, Gender, and Evangelical Christianity in America   *.*

Brandi Denison is an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of North Florida. Her teaching and research interests include North American religions, religion in the American West, race and ethnic identity, and theories and methods of religious studies. She is currently a coeditor for the Religion in the American West blog and is working on a manuscript titled Remove, Return, Remember: Ute Land Religion and Reconciliation in the American West *.*

From the Lecture Hall to the Computer Screen

As PhD students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, we were employed by [Carolina Courses Online](#) (CCO) to teach online courses. While we greatly appreciated the opportunity to teach online courses as a means of securing funding, we encountered a number of challenges that made online teaching a far different experience than traditional classroom teaching. Namely, we were unable to educate students about acceptable academic behaviors and had increased cases of plagiarism and proselytizing in online forums. We argue that the Internet can offer new and innovative pedagogical tools, but some models of online teaching constrained our flexibility and creativity as teachers to the detriment of our students. Our experience indicates that all instructors of online religious studies courses need to prepare for the issues of proselytizing and plagiarism that may emerge in discussion forums.

Blazer: In 2006, after several semesters as a teaching assistant and teaching my own course, the religious studies department allowed me to teach online courses to fund my final year at the University of North Carolina. I was glad for the opportunity because funding was limited and the opportunity to teach online courses was a relatively recent development. I designed two courses to be taught over the 2006–2007 academic year. The timing worked out well for me because I was able to use the year to conduct fieldwork for my dissertation research.

The second course that I developed, "Introduction to Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Religion," was popular in its face-to-face form at the university and was also in demand as an online course, enrolling 25–30 students. I designed the online course using the same course design as the face-to-face large-scale lecture class. It dealt with canonical debates within philosophy of religion such as the existence of God, the problem of evil, the relationship between faith and reason, and ideas on the afterlife. Each week, students were responsible for reading excerpts from a textbook and a posted lecture. The course content was due to CCO months before the semester began and mid-semester revisions were difficult. Should I have wanted to change these lectures, I would have had to submit my revisions to the course designer. Since I was a graduate student, my lectures needed approval both from the faculty member who taught the face-to-face version of the course and the department chair. These levels of oversight made mid-semester revisions untenable. I could, of course, post additional content to the course website, but this would appear as external to the lecture content.

I designed this course in 2006. YouTube, founded in 2005, was not the teaching resource it is today. Religious studies blogs were few and far between. I was given access to another CCO course to use as a model and that course was entirely text-based. So, as a result, my lectures included no images or media.

Denison: In the fall of 2010, I was offered a position teaching the same "Introduction to Philosophical Approaches to the Study of Religion" course. In my conversation with CCO, I learned that just as Blazer was paid to initially develop the course, CCO would pay future teachers to revise the course, provided that there had been significant changes in the field. This standard applies to all fields, but when applied to philosophy of religion, this rule is laughable. What would significant progress at the introductory level look like? A definitive proof (or disproof) of the existence of God? Even though new examples and commentary exist, the canon of texts remained relatively static, so it was not possible to argue that online pedagogical advances necessitated a substantive revision of the course.

The inability to revise the course meant that I could not respond to the changing Internet or pedagogy. For example, one of the more effective teaching tactics used in the face-to-face

class was linking pop culture examples to philosophical arguments. In class discussions, these examples became a shorthand for students struggling to recall the particulars of an argument. It also allowed the instructor to respond to the learning styles of a class, something that can't be anticipated during the course creation. However, the constraints on revision meant that I could not incorporate current events and video clips into the lectures. Furthermore, the restrictions on revising a course based solely on its content overlooked the rapid developments in online pedagogy and the shifting nature of the Internet. Given these restrictions, I found the teaching and learning experience unsatisfying.