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Old Problem, New Paradigm

Socrates was concerned. By nature, yes, concerned about many things, but in particular he seems to have been concerned with education. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates famously expresses his concern for the utility, power, and dangers of a new teaching technology — not Powerpoint, not blogging, not even Wikipedia, but
writing
itself. For Socrates and Plato, whose pedagogical techniques for the cultivation of knowledge relied on live-action, face-to-face dialogue, writing and rhetoric presented the particular dangers of forgetfulness and manipulation of truth. Although writing seems to be in it for the long haul, Socrates's fundamental concern for knowledge and the arena in which it is presented is no less relevant now, especially in regards to the world of online education.

In this short piece, my goal is not to run through the ins and outs of how I build online courses or to scrutinize the countless (and exciting) developing programs for online education; the accompanying links provided on the [Additional Resources](#) page can guide you in that

direction. My concern here is to speak more theoretically about the arena of the online environment and how it intersects with teaching; in particular, teaching religion. The arena is quite new and still working itself out — it was only around 2002 when the "Web 2.0" phenomenon even introduced the possibility for massive user interaction with websites, and the pace at which online educational opportunities, innovations, programs, departments, schools, and the like are expanding is overwhelmingly fast. Institutions, and educators in particular, may be feeling a fair amount of anxiety about exactly how to enter this arena, and for nontechnological natives, the learning curve feels extremely steep. The challenge is administrative, financial, and pedagogical, and the landscape of the teaching profession is changing as a result of it.

As a young, allegedly tech-savvy educator myself, I have mixed feelings about this incredible new medium, and there is constant pressure to be learning the newest tricks of the trade while remaining true to that age-old concern: knowledge. My own experience in online education and religious studies teaching emerges from a "boots on the ground" kind of training and is deeply rooted in both models — that of the brick-and-mortar classroom where I discovered my own love of teaching, and that of emerging Internet technologies, which I have grown up with and grown into. Since 2000, I have served as a graduate teaching assistant in both religious studies and classical studies, as a visiting and/or adjunct instructor in religious studies for three mid-Missouri institutions, and as a faculty member at a summer intensive gifted program for Missouri high school students. Additionally, I have taught in daytime classrooms, night classes, and online environments at these institutions. In short, even without the new challenges of teaching online, the "playing field" for young instructors already demands a certain flexibility, energy, and agility that mirrors the very pedagogical needs of teaching online. That is, I simply see the online arena as an extension of the already changing educational environment of our globalized infrastructure. This variety of experience has creatively and effectively informed my teaching style.

So, to return to the "old problem," the online arena is simply a new medium in which we all may offer our "wisdom." On one hand, this means we are not reinventing the wheel as educators. Usually, what works in the seminar or lecture hall also works online. However, the new framework demands a "good translation" of content so that it may effectively continue to do what it has always done.

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