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Focusing on Text, Not Technology

There's been a lot of noise in the news lately about MOOCs, and when people hear "online course" that's often the first thing to come to mind. And no wonder, what with all the breathless press they've been getting. However this essay is not going to address the MOOC platform/phenomenon/philosophy. In fact, my online teaching experience is at the other end of the spectrum — adapting a course that during the year meets face-to-face with up to 130 students to an online summer version with 6–10 students. In my experience, the online setting creates a strange, paradoxical world of faceless intimacy. This has both advantages and disadvantages, pedagogically speaking.

The course is "Introduction to Religion: Comparative" and I have taught it many times here at the University of Vermont. Inheriting a departmental ethos from the work of our illustrious emeritus chair, William Paden, the comparative nature of the course is essential. For case studies I draw on Buddhism, Islam, and Native American religions, and for an organizing principle, I use six of Ninian Smart's seven "dimensions" of religion. This way of structuring the course translates extremely well to the constraints of the online context. Each "dimension" is a unit/week of the semester and can be neatly compartmentalized into its own folder on the "course materials" page of the Blackboard site for the class.

When I first started teaching online, it was a great advantage to me that I had already used many of the functions of Blackboard and was familiar with the platform. I also had an advantage in the form of the Center for Teaching and Learning, a resource for University of Vermont faculty and staff managed out of the main library on campus. The Center offered a paid course, funded by the continuing education department, which led professors and lecturers from all over the university through the process of converting a course from a face-to-face format to online only. The most valuable part of this course was Wendy Verrai-Berenback, the person who was assigned to me, to answer any questions I had and to run interference between myself and the media department to arrange for films to be available and to handle copyrights. Without Verrai-Berenback, my course would not have succeeded. Having good professional development support is essential to creating a good online course.

As I took that course myself (a hybrid-style course, partly online and a few meetings in person), I began to realize that some of my preconceptions about “distance learning” or online courses were in fact the opposite of what actually occurs. In my mind, I had worried that the online version of a class would be too lightweight — too much video and web browsing, and not enough text. The reality of it is that it is almost nothing but text. The students write more than they ever would in my face-to-face version of the class, because they never literally speak — all their speech is written speech. So there is no such thing as an informal conversation or the back-and-forth of a classroom discussion; there are only written words. Even the most casual discussion board assignment is open to editing and revision. This realization seemed like a paradox to me — the most tech-oriented version of the course was also the most text-oriented.

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