Christian Schooling and ONLINE LEARNING

By Chris Parker

Introduction

Can Christian education be authentically delivered online? Can Christian *schooling* 'go online' and still offer a Christian education? When schools find themselves in a push to move their teaching and learning temporarily into online formats (as many have done through the global coronavirus outbreak), Christian schools need to ask these big questions lest they fall into a pragmatism that may work against their mission and vision to deliver a distinctive Christian education. This article serves as a guide to schools and educators during this period when asking these crucial questions.

Frameworks for designing online learning often speak of the three Cs that are important to consider. In a one-day professional development workshop offered by the University of Sydney, I was taught that one must consider *content*, *context*, and *community* when designing an online curriculum. Although a Google search for "the three Cs of online learning" returns many different schemas (e.g., content, connect, collaborate; content, construction, consolidation; consistency, creativity, community; connectivity, compassion, communication, etc.), this article will explore Christian education and online learning using *content*, *context*, and *community* with their alignment to curriculum design, formational learning, and the learning community and culture.

This article will also explore some of the hidden curriculum learning that may occur when education is moved into an online format and finish with suggestions for Christian educators to consider in their attempt to redeem these narratives. We will conclude with a checklist of questions and considerations for schools, and teachers, when moving Christian education online.

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Asynchronous and Synchronous

A note on the timing of online learning. Many schools have a suite of learning areas that have previously adopted a blended approach where asynchronous online learning is offered as an adjunct to the face-to-face classroom learning—this has existed for many years in some schools. Christian schools considering moving some of their learning online will need to decide between the learning being synchronous (all learners connecting at the same time) or asynchronous (learning is individually paced and accessed flexibly at a time that suits the learner). This decision will have significant pragmatic system-based considerations, but may also be driven by important principles such as connection, relationship, and community. It may even be that schools which have previously developed blended approaches may choose to rework the online component to being synchronous, so that online learners and face-to-face learners may still follow the same timetable.

This article raises questions and considerations for all variations of online learning, while acknowledging that the emphasis on the considerations may be different for asynchronous and synchronous expressions.

The Medium Has a Shaping Influence

Before exploring the 3 Cs of online learning, we briefly turn our attention to the notion so helpfully explored by McLuhan when he claimed that "the medium *is* the message" (1964). The more that we move from simple face-to-face communicating of a message, toward using a technology to mediate the message, the more the message will have additional layers of shaping influence woven in. The message is still there, but it comes riding a Trojan horse (the technology) full of an army of hidden messages with varying levels of threat. As teachers we must consider the hidden curriculum that may be unfolded in this way, and especially so when we embrace a full delivery of learning in an online format. As Christian teachers we consider and critique the "pattern of this world" potentially woven into the technologies we employ to avoid having minds transformed by them. We both employ, and teach, a discernment and wisdom that are shaped by God's revealed Word to allow our minds to be renewed (Rom 12:2).

Consider social media by way of example. An analysis of this media might suggest that it is simply a form of communicating news, information, and personal updates with a chosen selection of people/friends. Social media technology simply makes it more efficient—traveling around door-to-door to tell your select group of a life update, is replaced by the ease of broadcasting the same message with the press of a button. However, the question must be asked, "Is efficiency the only thing that has been added to this human transaction, or does the medium have additional messages woven in?".

At one level there may be hidden messages around the definition of what is 'news' and what is suitable as a personal update—and we could all cite potential (even comical) examples of the trivialising that has resulted. At another level, perhaps more significant, we consider the hidden character-shaping message that it is not only okay to be narcissistic (self-focused in our interaction with the world), but that it is also virtuous. Social commentators are recognising the rise of the acceptance of narcissism resulting from online engagement. Even when we use a medium/technology well, we may still be shaped by the 'pattern' of the medium.

Christian schools must always be aware of the hidden curriculum woven into the technologies embraced by the institution and its community. From school uniforms to timetables, additional messages are being given. Therefore, the Christian school moving teaching and learning online must be equally diligent in asking questions about the messages of life and world that might be woven in to the medium.

Discard or Discernment

Do we conclude then that technology is ruinous and to be avoided?; that authentic Christian education can't, maybe shouldn't, be taught online? Absolutely not. As with all things, we recognise that God in His graciousness has given us a good world to live and play in. This goodness extends to the abilities He has given humans, through His common grace, to invent and innovate amazing technologies. However, we also recognise that the cracks, resulting from our rebellion, that are woven through all things, provide anchor points for the "powers of this dark world" (Eph 6: 12) that whisper woven messages that pull us away from full God-honouring lives.

We therefore embrace the possibilities of technologies to serve needs. Sometimes those needs are acute and the technology becomes a rich blessing. The move by schools

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(including Christian schools) around the world towards a large part of their learning online, as they temporarily perform school at home during the coronavirus pandemic, is a great example. However, we must embrace with discernment and wisdom. We acknowledge the distortions, avoid naive pragmatism, and discern the hidden messages. We nurture a wise approach through prayer and, perhaps most importantly, we seek to teach and model this discernment and wisdom to the students in our care.

Curriculum Design (Content)

Christian educators recognise that every time curriculum is taught, it is unfolded through a particular view of the world—its origins, nature, status, and purpose, etc. Christian education includes the intention to unfold all curricula through a view of life and world that is shaped by the big, beautiful, biblical narrative (as opposed to the materialist, humanity-centred, secular lens that pervades Western culture). Van Dyk (2012) suggests that all teaching involves unfolding, but the Christian teacher asks, is it "… merely a world of nature controlled by natural law, or a creation revealing God's presence, power and love?".

This is no less the case when designing online content. However, the plethora of impressive adjunct curriculum material available online, and the ease in which it can be integrated into our online learning packages—with the click of a few buttons—might bring a temptation to let the quality of these resources drive the design of the curriculum. In *Transformation by Design: The Big Picture*, Dickens et al. (2015) suggest that designing Christian curriculum is like building a house where it is important to first design, plan, and build a solid framework that everything else then hangs on (plumbing, ceiling, wall sheets, lights and, ultimately, the family photos). Starting with the ceiling fans, the paint, and the kitchen cupboards when designing a house, may result in lovely colours and fixtures, but they might be sitting within a poorly designed—or non-existent—framework. Without the solid biblical foundation and perspective driving the design, the hidden messages of the media (online learning technologies), or even the dominant secular patterns, might have the strongest formational impact.

Additionally, if the curriculum design does not begin with a solid biblical framework of bearers, joists, studs, and noggins, the tendency, of even the well-meaning Christian educator,

might be to squeeze a biblical perspective into the material. This may result in a tacky, out-of-context use of the Bible and may actually inoculate the students against the full impact of the gospel. Perhaps this is all the more tempting with Bible plugins, and the ease of hyperlinking to biblical texts? Does online curriculum design require a greater diligence and commitment to ensuring a biblical foundation from the beginning, lest the 'medium' inadvertently fragment the desired message of authentic Christian education?

Formational Learning (Context)

The context in which teaching and learning occurs will significantly influence the impact and transfer of the ideas to other learning and life settings—the depth of learning. A learning session that has students copy information from the board to their books, compared to one where the same content is taught through a pre-test, a suite of Socratic questions, a mock debate, small group discussion, and a personal reflection on progress along a learning journey, provides a quite different context for the content. This is the teaching and learning context. It is of equal importance as curriculum design, and it is certainly no less important in online learning than in more traditional classroom settings.

When external forces press upon the limited resources of teaching (time pressures, structural pressures, cultural pressures), learning in all settings may have a tendency to fall back to an emphasis on mere information at the cost of deeper transformation—a transformation that Christian education seeks. Smith (2009) suggests:

> Education is not primarily … concerned with providing information; rather, education most fundamentally is a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people. These people are distinct because of what they love and desire – the kingdom of God. (p. 26)

Are there characteristics inherent in online learning structures and transmission that may result in the Christian educator needing to fight harder not to default back to information delivery over deeper formational learning? If we consider a continuum that goes from data, to information, to knowledge, to wisdom, we recognise that the ultimate goal of Christian education is to move through to a discerning wisdom. However, the information and communication technologies that are the backbone of online learning are so proficient at the data and information end of the continuum

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that a whispered hidden message, "There is no real need to progress further along towards wisdom", may be at times woven into learning. As teachers embrace online learning for the first time, there may be a tendency to focus on the translation of the curriculum content into **in**formational forms with an initial under-emphasis on learning design that incorporates intentional **trans**formational strategies.

In *Transformation by Design: Crafting Formational Learning*, Hanscamp et al. (2019) offer 10 examples of teaching and learning strategies that may aid in deeper formational learning in our pursuit of more than mere information. See Table 1 below:

Example Strategy	Description
Hook	Creative way to launch and engage students into a new topic area
Clash	Contrasting ideas, cognitive dissonance, charitable debating, etc.
Collaborate	Social learning and engaging by empowering student voice
Connect	Connecting content to life and other audiences
Experience	Immersing students in authentic learning experiences
Question	Using questioning to challenge and pivot students in their learning
Story	Using story, anecdote, and testimony open up the learning
Reflect	Metacognition and reflecting; learning about learning
Think	Fostering critical thinking, discernment, and wisdom
Act	The response action that flows from learning

Table 1. Adapted from Hanscamp (2019, p. 156)

It may be that online learning offers an even wider selection of formational learning that leads to wisdom (whether synchronous, asynchronous, or blended). Online learning may offer new and creative formational learning strategies. However, Christian educators will need to be deliberate in leveraging this potential of online tools, while being careful not to uncritically embrace novel strategies—acknowledging that novelty, surface engagement, and excitement that might motivate students to keep busy, don't necessarily result in deeper formational learning.

Learning Culture (Community)

An authentic and mutually respectful relationship between the teacher and the student is crucial for deep learning. When this relational truth is extended to the class as a community, powerful engaged learning can result.

This is why Christian educators all over the globe are currently exploring ways to leverage the available features of online learning to reduce the de-humanising tendency that moving from the classroom to online learning brings—the increased presence of technology as a mediator. We will have varying levels of success at this, as it is inherently a compromise for a time, but it is a noble and important thing to bring our God-given creative energies to.

Christian educators also need to be continually discerning of the community/culture shaping that many of the tools and practices woven into online learning might bring. Are there structures, features, plugins, tools that might actually be shaping a culture in the class community that ultimately promotes competitive individualism and unhelpful comparison? There are many high quality, engaging 'social' features within online learning platforms, and available broadly on the Internet, that are easily integrated, but are they ultimately going to help or hinder the creation of a self-less, grace-full, God-motivated learning community with a shared vision for learning? Are there ways that we can adapt, modify, and rework features so to minimise the counter-biblical 'message' of individualism and maximise the true story of flourishing relationship and community in the context of learning?

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Conclusion

The transition by Christian schools into delivering a significant portion of their teaching and learning into an online medium is new territory for Christian schools. Even though the vision and objectives of Christian education may not have changed at all, the form and medium are new. Whenever we walk into new territory the energies of mere adjustment can be all-consuming. Are you finding this at the moment? While we step forth into the new, we must commit a goodly portion of our energies to the original vision of Christian education, lest the medium, with its hidden temptations and pragmatisms, pull us away from the Lordship of Jesus over the education of our children.

The following questions may serve as a checklist to aid in practical critical reflection. The encouragement is to discuss and review with colleagues. Because this is such new territory, maybe staff meetings could have a portion dedicated to exploring some of these questions/issues.

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Discussion Questions *continued*

Context

- How does our online learning context show a primary commitment to deep learning and student formation?
- How do you creatively adapt practice to make online teaching and learning transformational?
- What are some of the features and structures of your school's online learning package that might subtly encourage a tendency towards information over transformation and deeper learning?
- What are some of the features of online learning that students might be captivated by but that are not necessarily leading to deep learning?

Community

- What hindrances to relational learning and community-building have you seen in online learning? How can you combat these?
- There are features and opportunities integrated into online learning to minimise the relational compromise. Discuss with colleagues your successes and failures in accessing and using these.
- Which integrated features and tools in your school's online learning package could promote individualism that hinders community? How could you adapt the package to minimise this?

Discussion Questions

Content

- How can we discern whether the biblical big picture is driving our online curriculum design?
- In what ways can you see pragmatic concerns influencing the starting point for curriculum design?

Chris is a lecturer and presenter for the National Institute for Christian Education and Christian Education National. He is also the editor of the *Christian Teachers Journal* and author of the book *The Frog and the Fish*. Chris, Coco, and their two teenage children live in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney.