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Introduction: The Rise and Evolution of Distance Education

The U.S. Department of Education (the DOE) defines distance education (or DE) as “education that uses one or more types of technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously” (“Distance Education in IPEDS”). DE can be traced back at least to Sir Isaac Pitman, who taught shorthand writing by mail in 1840. Pitman would mail text on postcards to students, and students would mail their assignments back to him. DE has evolved and is evolving alongside advances in technology, which among other things, has greatly reduced the lag and perceived distance between students and their learning environment. The potential for greater reach and accessibility, flexible modes of learning, and the changing economics of higher education has increasingly made DE an appealing and viable educational modality.

Willingly or reluctantly, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly pushed most American schools to adopt some form of DE. In spring 2020, 77% of public schools were remote and 84% of college students reported having some or all classes moved to online-only instruction (NCES 2023). But even before the global pandemic forced the hands of educational institutions, the growth of various modes of remote education had been one of the most notable trends in formal postsecondary education in the past few decades. Tracking fall enrollment in postsecondary institutions from 2012 to 2021, the DOE reported that the percent of students enrolled in DE courses rose steadily from 25.5% in 2012 to 36.3% in 2019, spiking to 73.4% in 2020, and settling back down to 59% in 2021 (Student Enrollment 2023). Furthermore, student interest or demand for online postsecondary education is only expected to trend upward (CHLOE 7 2022, 4).

As DE has transitioned from the experimental phase to mainstream adoption, research and writing on the efficacy and practices of DE has also proliferated and evolved. We have observed two eras and a possible emerging third era in reviewing literature on DE for the past thirty years. Up until around 2010, the literature largely explored the skepticism about the equality of an online education compared to a traditional in-person class. The driving question in this era centered around DE as a viable and efficacious alternative. However, a turn towards legitimacy was undergirded by hundreds of studies which Thomas Russell notably compiled in his book, *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* (1999), that concluded that there was “no significant difference” between traditional and distance education as it relates to a large battery of educational outcomes, such as student satisfaction and testing performance. In 2004, the US Department of Education (DOE) released the “National Education Technology Plan.” The plan predicted that online instruction and virtual schools would lead to a new golden age in American education. In November, 2010, Arne Duncan, head of the DOE sent to Congress the plan, “Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology.” This 80-page plan signaled a switch from viability to effective pedagogy. The plan gave no criticism or reference to the ‘no-difference’ language in the 173 times that the plan referenced online education.

Having largely settled the viability question, the second era DE literature shifted towards best practices for asynchronous learning. Several notable developments also accelerated this shift towards examining and fine-tuning online pedagogy. Program management companies emerged and proliferated starting around 2010 to provide services and resources for schools to start or rework their online offerings. Public uproar about the predatory practices of for-profit colleges, who were accused of operating as “greedy diploma mills,” placed a spotlight on the quality of DE education, which led to greater regulation under the Obama administration. There was a subsequent rollback of these measures under Betsy DeVos and the Trump administration (Kreighbaum). Dueling studies in 2019 cautioned the unqualified acceptance of the viability of DE and also called for increased Federal examination for pedagogy (Protopsaltis et.al., Hill). The possible emergence of a third era in which both viability and pedagogy are revisited will be considered at the end.

In what follows, we will share our institutional story of transitioning to DE and the lessons we have learned along the way as we passed through the eras of viability and pedagogy. Reflecting critically on the two ATS peer reports, we will also note what improvements we hope to make within our programs in the hopes that it might spur ideas for improvements in your educational context.

DE at Wheaton College

In the fall of 2017, a section of the Graduate School at Wheaton College developed online courses to meet the needs of rapidly growing programs in Evangelism, Leadership, Ministry, and Humanitarian Disaster Leadership.¹ These programs have grown from a handful of students to over 250 students over the past five years. We did not jump into fully online programs, purposely weighting our curriculum toward face-to-face (60% to 40%) because of the institutional history of strong push-back toward online programs. Some voices resisted this robust offering of online courses, echoing the concerns of the pre-2010 era of skepticism of online course viability. To counter the push-back, we developed a rigorous amount of asynchronous interaction in each course module and hired prominent lecturers like NT Wright, Harold Netland, and Ray Bakke to create video content in chunks of about 7 minutes per lecture in accordance to commonly recommended best practices (Guo). We wanted curricular standards that would be significantly more rigorous than the face-to-face (f2f) class.

Although some attention around spiritual and community formation was given to our new online courses, our primary evaluative factor was rigor. We thought that rigor, defined as a lot of reading, writing, and listening to lectures, was the answer to the viability question. When considering which courses should be developed in the online modality, our initial thought was that certain courses would be better suited for one modality over another because some courses were more “high touch” than others. We intentionally steered away from courses that we deemed as formation courses.

This overall cautious and rigorous approach was matched by the institution with abundant resources. There was an active commitment to Quality Matters™ and training of staff and professors in the QM™ principles of alignment and clarity. A spacious studio was outfitted and staffed, a learning management system (LMS) administrator and instructional developer gave part of their time, and a full-time online projects coordinator was hired to manage the program expansion. Funds were allotted by the administration to seed the creation of twelve courses, including the hiring of video presenters and subject matter experts. Online projects in the previous decade had been “under the radar” but the direction in 2017/2018 academic year culminated in the push for accreditation and the seeking of approval by the Higher Learning Commission for the Wheaton Graduate School to offer online degrees. Key institutional helps were also

¹ These were not the first online programs at Wheaton. Teaching English as a Second Language and Intercultural Studies Departments had started small programs in the decade before. Also, the student survey data used in this paper is based on the feedback from four M.A. degree programs—Ministry Leadership, Evangelism and Leadership, Leadership (formerly Global Leadership), and Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership.

given through dedicated library resources and partnership with the writing center. The number of faculty trained in QM™ standards was high at first, but declined during the COVID pandemic, so not all faculty building courses or teaching at this time were formally trained.

Prior to COVID, our student evaluations showed that the students were satisfied with the academic rigor of our courses. A slight Likert decrease of 2% expressed student concern with professor and student engagement. We didn't look deeply into the student comments to comprehend the warning signs of these slightly lower scores. After all, students had plenty of time for engagement during the other courses that were taught as in-person intensives. Also, before significant pedagogical adjustments could be made to increase engagement, COVID struck. The staff and other resources that had been available for online course development were now tasked with bringing the entire campus up to remote-speed.

Fortunately, the student evaluations of the courses continued during COVID and the post-COVID period. Student evaluations ($n=92$) again showed high Likert scores overall. But an AI examination of student comments told a different story. Students had written a total of 518 comments that we manually coded into the five topical categories of Video lecture, Professor engagement, Student Engagement, Organization, and Course content. The large language model AI examined the student comments and the data showed that for all five categories, comments were average 33% more negative than the Likert scores. The engagement element, which is most critical to spiritual formation, showed 49% difference between the comments and Likert. Negative comments focused on the lack of in-person interaction, the difficulty in engaging spiritually, and the frustration of online learning. Some students expressed a preference for face-to-face discussions or live video sessions with the instructor, and others mentioned that the online environment limited their ability to connect with other students. Did this data show inherent weakness in online education or was it the way online spiritual formation was delivered in the Wheaton Graduate School?

Distance Education and Theological Education

The mission of Wheaton's Litfin School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership captures our commitment to whole person, "head, heart, hand" formation: [It states] "Inspiring and equipping academically grounded, spiritually maturing, and practically skilled leaders who live out Christ's mission, proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel and serving the Church in a changing world." While we have benefited from reviewing DE literature from the broader academic and educational community, given our school's

mission, we are especially interested in the subset of DE literature that speak into the specific concerns and demands of Christian theological education. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has been especially productive in producing helpful research and literature at this intersection.

For several decades, a steady stream of articles on DE has been published through their journal *Theological Education*. As expected, the broader shifts in the DE literature are also reflected in *Theological Education*. For example, the driving question in Anne Reissner's article (1999)—can DE be transformational education—is a contextualized version of the first era preoccupation with viability. In a sign of things to come, Reissner concluded, “The schools reviewed in this study offer signs of hope that theological distance education can be transformative education” (1999, 100).

ATS's work through the Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project (EMP) is significant second era work (EMP 2017). The EMP was launched around 2016 and eventually secured the participation of over 300 representatives from 110 ATS member schools to investigate the challenges, opportunities, and effective practices related to various educational models and practices. Two of the eighteen peer working groups were tasked with exploring DE. What follows is a summary of key takeaways from their significant work.

Educational Values of Online Education

Seven ATS member schools collaborated in the “Educational Values of Online Education” group to study the challenges and opportunities of DE and to offer general recommendations for good practices and outcomes. Participating schools reaffirmed the efficacy of their online offerings, reporting that “among those who have compared student learning assessment results for their online and their onsite offerings, the vast majority (71%) indicated that the best way to describe those two results was ‘similar’” (2017, 26). In our student surveys, 70% of Wheaton Graduate students said that their online courses were “similar to the average in-person course” or better. One major deliberation centered on whether ATS standards should differ between online and residential. Recommending that ATS adopt a modality neutral stance in formulating accreditation standards related to quality learning, the peer group noted (2017, 30),

We determined that neither f2f nor online learning was superior to the other even after meeting with the peer group on Formation in Online Contexts. Instead, we feel the ATS standards would be best suited if they are modality-neutral. Good online education will attend to the same concerns that a good residential-based education does, so there is no need to distinguish between the two.

When considering which courses should be developed in the online modality, our initial instinct was that certain courses would be better suited for one modality over another. While that may still turn out to be the case for certain courses and certain educational objectives, what we are finding is that our hesitation in developing an online version of an existing f2f course has more to do with the limitations of our pedagogical imagination rather than any intrinsic limitation that the online modality poses. In particular, reevaluating the assumption that education should be primarily campus-centric, with the exception of occasional field trips, has helped to release pedagogical creativity. The peer group's recommendation of modal neutrality is both an affirmation of the potential efficacy of DE and also for us, a challenge to reimagine what robust, transformative education looks like regardless of modality.

Based on a 2016 survey of 141 academic deans of ATS schools (2017, 24), the report noted that the most significant challenges to online education included faculty training (60%), good instructional design (56%), formation online (51%), and relationship building (34%). According to the same survey, the most significant opportunities and benefits included contextualized learning that occur in the student's home environment, readily reviewable and flexible modality that allows for individualized pacing and review of materials that fit student needs, and a renewed commitment to instructional design that carried over to f2f. We have also found that asynchronous online discussion forums naturally democratize participation more so than discussion in a f2f course, where the participation levels between shy, reserved students and more outgoing, vocal students can be rather stark. DE can also expand the reach of schools, lowering the barrier for students who are unavailable to relocate due to other commitments or because of prohibitive costs. Relatedly, enhanced accessibility can bring more social and experiential diversity within the student body.

According to the report, characteristics of quality online education can be described as accessible, affordable, communal, connected/missional, contextual, deliberate, equitable, flexible, formational, global, rigorous, and thoughtful. Lastly, they propose that effective course design includes explicit expectations, work grounded in specific learning objectives, activities that promote active learning and critical thinking, and addresses diverse learning preferences.

Formation in Online Contexts

Seven other schools collaborated in the "Formation in Online Contexts" peer group, focusing on exploring principles for fostering formation, or whole person development, through DE. Harkening back to the assumptions underlying first era questions, it has

been commonly assumed that formation can only happen or best happens in face-to-face (f2f) or residential contexts. As the report observes, there is another common assumption that formation happens naturally in a traditional school setting and ironically, online programs often give more focused attention and intentionality to formation than residential programs. Just as traditional education can be transformative, but not necessarily so, the same can be said about DE. Setting aside the first era question of viability, this report explores the second era concern of how we ought to do DE so that it is formational and transformational in the Christian sense. Six general educational principles for formation are suggested (EMP 2017, 13):

- 1) Each institution must define formation in ways that fit their missions, constituents, and particular degree programs. Models must be shaped with intentional outcomes that are measurable.
- 2) Formation includes preparation for the communities to be served.
- 3) Formation is intensely relational.
- 4) Faculty need to be prepared to contribute to student formation.
- 5) Institutions should recognize online students as “regular students” and value residential and online students equally.
- 6) Outcomes for residential and online students must be the same.

While all the members of this peer group agreed that formation was central to theological education, there were “significant differences” in how the ecclesologically diverse schools understand formation (EMP 2017, 9). What held through their difference though was their collective assumption that belonging and community are central to the formation process. However programs define and understand formation, they suggest that online programs “must attend to the extracurricular and cocurricular dimensions of theological education and formation that once were assumed to take place through the residential model” (EMP 2017, 9). So, formation for online and traditional residential programs alike must be thoughtfully defined and planned for pedagogically by way of formal, informal, extracurricular, and cocurricular educational experiences. This is a significant growth area for our M.A. programs, which has prompted recent meetings and conversations with various stakeholders like the director of graduate student life and program directors to address gaps in our care for remote students. We have focused our attention on the creation of rigorous online classes and have largely neglected how our online courses are part of a larger, formative educational experience for online students that include opportunities for co-curricular

and extracurricular activities. While formation is formally part of the curriculum (e.g., a four hour “Leadership and Spiritual Formation” course for the Evangelism and Leadership degree program, a four hour “Personal Development and Leadership in Ministry” course for the Ministry and Leadership degree program), compared to the ample opportunities like clubs, service opportunities, and lectures readily available to residential undergraduate students, there is relatively little resources allocated for remote graduate students besides livestreamed chapel services.

Studies have demonstrated that effective online pedagogy and positive student outcomes is strongly correlated to perceived instructor engagement and a student’s sense of connectedness to their teachers (Martin and Bolliger 2018; Gillett-Swan 2017, Ma et. al., 2015). Meeting regularly with remote students to mentor and build relationships ought to be seen as a normative part of DE and the formation process. For our remote students, rather than regular office hours where students can pop in for a chat, students are asked to schedule calls on an as needed basis. As such, there is a loss of additional potential contact time and informal community building by way of running into each other in the halls and open office visits. As such, we now ask instructors to schedule synchronous video calls with the class throughout the semester (at least one meeting per credit hour), not for the dissemination of course materials, but for the purpose of approximating being together at the same time and place to support one another.

While remote students may sense a disconnect from the physical campus community, our flexible graduate programs have the potential advantage of allowing students to remain embedded and connected to their present community and ministry context rather than uprooted, which is also a loss for the community that they serve. Many of our graduate students are currently working vocationally at a church or in a parachurch ministry so our asynchronous courses enable them to remain serving in their ministry and as many students have often commented in their feedback, to immediately apply their learnings to their work. As part of our vision for whole person development, we are also intentional about incorporating assignments that push students toward local and interpersonal engagement and service that fosters community connectivity and the development of “soft skills.” Engagement does not have to be campus centric but again, this requires thoughtful partnering and monitoring of student experiences to ensure that they are accessing both local and school resources that facilitate formation. In this model, the “school is no longer the primary provider of student experiences, but rather an orchestrator of the resources in which the students are embedded” (EMP 2007, 10).

Also, most of our MA Ministry and Leadership and MA Evangelism and Leadership students are part of a cohort that moves through the program together. We have observed that this cohort model helps to foster meaningful relationships and a strong sense of communal belonging among our students, all of which provides the necessary conditions for formation. Students have commented that the fact that they had prior in-person hybrid courses with the peers in their online courses helped them to have a sense of connectedness and community throughout their online experience that they had while in-person. If an in-person gathering is not feasible, programs should consider ways to having remote students build relationships with their peer prior to jumping into an online course.

The report also emphasizes the importance of institutional support in training and resourcing faculty for effective online teaching. It is not unusual for teachers accustomed to traditional modes of education to have strong reservations about teaching online. Common concerns include having to learn and utilize a learning management system (LMS), which requires some technical proficiency. As such, even seasoned teachers must be trained for the particularities of online pedagogy. As other schools with reported, we have benefited from investing in a robust LMS, and in having devoted personnel who have expertise in and can assist with online instructional design and technological support.

Lastly, there should be equity between remote and residential students, both in terms of full and equivalent resource allocation, and expected student outcomes. Rather than assuming certain learning outcomes cannot be met effectively through DE, like spiritual formation, and hence settling for two different sets of outcomes for remote and residential students, programs should instead be open to being pleasantly surprised by and learning from others who are developing innovative and effective pedagogies. In our graduate programs, our traditional in-person courses have an online version that have the same learning outcomes and in fact, the student learning outcomes match or in some cases exceed that of in-person course. Institutions should also provide comparable resources to remote students, like adapted library access, inclusion into student development programs, and full access to student services. As part of effort to ensure equity and to address the aforementioned growth areas in resource allocation, we are moving towards including survey questions that specifically ask students about their awareness of and their experiences in accessing various resources.

Third Era Recommendations

Whereas the first era of contemporary DE (pre-2010) was characterized by viability and the second (2010-2020) by refining pedagogy, in the shadows of the global pandemic (post-2010), there are indicators that we are transitioning to a third era of reexamining both viability and pedagogy through a student-centric lens. The broad educational landscape has been shifting toward shorter, more flexible degree programs, micro-credentials, certificates, and other non-degree programs. This trend in part stems from a competitive educational marketplace that has shifted more power to educational consumers who are driving demand for such programs. On the other hand, the global pandemic forced many schools to hastily pivot to DE, much of which was done synchronously over video conferencing platforms like Zoom and gave rise to a growing awareness of the potential for technological overdependency and negative social impacts like “Zoom fatigue.” While DE, done well, has been demonstrated to produce great educational outcomes, at what human cost? This puts DE late adopters or laggards in a difficult position to negotiate both market demands and legitimate concerns and weariness about heavily technologically mediated education.

We conclude with some final recommendations for navigating this third era of reexamining viability and pedagogy. First, we recommend incorporating robust student feedback into every level of programming. In constructing questions, consider the areas and issues that were discussed in the two ATS reports. Second, institution support is vital to success, and it may be wise to slow down the process if the level of support and resourcing is incongruous with an appropriate level of quality (see the twelve characteristics listed in the *Educational Values of Online Education* report). Third, just as schools have an admissions process for traditional students that involves assessing the readiness for academic success, we should likewise think in fresh ways about characteristics that a successful online student for ministry training might need, such as being disciplined and capable of independent learning, and some who is already embedded within a faith community and serving in their community. Finally, we must think holistically about the student experience beyond the quality of each class; we need to continue planning for holistic formation, rather than assuming it will happen naturally. For accessible, flexible, robust theological DE, we must think purposefully and creatively, which may mean discarding the traditional paradigm of the campus-centric model, and leaning into a different paradigm that sees the school as an “orchestrator of the resources in which the students are embedded.”

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