

Engaging Technology in Theological Education

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It is no longer a question of whether or not we should find ways to use digital technologies, particularly as related to the online environment and the need to provide lifelong learning for ministry. Our constituents expect it. The question we want ask is, "How shall we use these technologies toward fulfilling our mission and vision?" Mary Hess's book, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), is beneficial for informing how we approach that question.

As an educator engaged in research and the use of online Connected Learning, one aspect of Hess' book that I particularly appreciated was how she spoke to the question of instrumentality vs. embodiment in how we use these technologies as educators with an incarnational faith.

In reflecting on some of the classical questions of how we know, what are the limits of human knowing, and how learning supports human knowledge, Dr. Hess observes that, "The process of integrating digital technologies into theological education raises these foundational questions anew, because there are myriad ways in which we are facing new choices, new possibilities" (p. 22). She continues,

The advent of the Web, for instance, and with it the ability to take teaching and learning out of our typical classrooms and practice it in a way that erases time and ignores geography, has brought some particularly thorny dilemmas front and center. We profess faith in an incarnational God — what does it mean to engage a technology that perhaps urges us to ignore our own embodiedness? Isn't the practice of ministry a fundamentally relational process, and so shouldn't our teaching of it be that, too? Does technology urge us to ignore our embodiedness? Or can it make our relationality more tangible? Does digital technology erase our humanity, or make our common bonds more visible?

These are crucial questions for all of us to ask, but I am impatient with some of the rush to simplistic answers. Rather than assuming that online distributive formats are disembodied, for instance, or that our most familiar forms of pedagogy in typical classrooms are also our most fully embodied pedagogies, I'd like us to pause and consider the questions more deeply. (p. 23)

Having observed the interactions of reflective peer learning groups in more than 150 online seminars over the past four years and the formation of relational connections in a globally dispersed learning community, I appreciate Dr. Hess's encouragement to pause and consider more deeply. The narratives that I have heard, whether typed or spoken, reflect a sense of being with one another in community and in taking the learning risks of shared reflection on deeply held values and assumptions. Since I have also had opportunity to observe and participate in both online and onground educational programs that focused on a pedagogy of transmission of information, I appreciate her encouragement to pause and consider even more.

Dr. Hess proclaims, "I think we need to realize that 'digital technologies' are far more than computers on our desktops, useful for e-mail and the Web. While they are certainly that, they are also increasingly the architecture within which mass mediated culture is constructed" (p. 27).

As we ponder these questions, Dr. Hess leaves us with this challenge:

What we are called to is not a simple acceptance or rejection — whether we are talking about possible theological

reflection on a single popular film, or the appropriateness of using digital technologies within theological education – this is not an instrumental challenge, but instead an adaptive one. We must find ways to invite each other into sustained reflection that is respectful of each others’ needs and those of our communities. We must invite reflection on this “nothing” and in so doing problematize the “something” as well. (p. 75)

I encourage reading this book because of how it informs thinking about how we use digital technologies. And since Dr. Hess will be the featured speaker for the 2008 SACEM conference, I encourage reading it prior to that February meeting. It is available through the SACEM Online Bookstore.