by Kyle K. Schiefelbein

Educational Technology at the GTU and Beyond

Above the desk in my office on the first floor of the GTU library hangs a framed poster that was given to me a couple of years ago. The poster is mostly in black and white and features a picture of an older book opened to stylized Latin text. It's actually an advertisement for IBM, announcing that "www.martinluther.de is an IBM e-business"; the website provides a virtual tour of the Luther museum in Wittenberg, Germany. The book is opened to the *Te igitur* of the Roman Canon.

This poster highlights the question of how the theological disciplines studied at the GTU are impacted by modern communication technologies. As such, it serves as an ideal visualization for thinking about the current and future state of theological education, and how technology shapes my own work here as the new course design specialist at the GTU. (As an aside, my PhD is in liturgical studies, so the content of the book pictured on the poster also brings in my academic discipline.)

The GTU has sought to incorporate emerging technologies into theological education throughout the last couple of decades. An initial push happened in the early 2000s, when smart-classrooms were installed in the GTU library and at the member schools, allowing faculty and students to display multimedia presentations in classroom settings. At the same time, the GTU acquired Blackboard, a popular online learning management system. The library increased its electronic holdings, and the GTU and member schools began to develop courses and programs that were partially or fully online.

In 2008, responding to the need to continue refreshing our technology in an ever-changing age, the GTU transitioned from Blackboard to Moodle, an open-source online learning management system that better aligned with the collaborative and constructivist pedagogical needs of theological education. That year, in the second year of my PhD program, I was hired to be student coordinator of online learning (commonly known at the GTU as the "Moodle guy"), a position I had until 2013. During that period, the GTU not only rolled out Moodle to be used throughout the consortium, but also increased its training in online teaching techniques.

Technology can shape course design in various ways. But just as the Reformation's use of the Gutenberg printing press was successful only because of the content of the message, the technology in today's theological classroom is only as good as pedagogy behind it. My work here at the GTU goes beyond the online environment to assist

faculty and doctoral students in incorporating all sorts of technology into a variety of classes. Since technology is only helpful if it is well grounded pedagogically, some courses do not necessarily benefit from incorporating the fanciest computer equipment money can buy. In addition, it's essential to remember that "technology" encompasses more than just computers and computer-related products; it also includes the classroom furniture, handouts given to students, 3D-printed models, and the like.

In the upcoming months, I will be working with GTU faculty individually and through group workshops to look at all phases of course design and development, from the construction of learning outcomes to developing interactive content to creating assessable collaboration and artifacts. These are all important components of both residential and online courses.

In focusing on these goals, the GTU is fulfilling and even exceeding the requirements put forth by our accrediting agency, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS): "Institutions using instructional technology to enhance face-to-face courses and/or provide online-only courses shall be intentional in addressing matters of coherence between educational values and choice of media, recognizing that the learning goals of graduate education should guide the choice of digital resources, that teaching and learning maintains its focus on the formation and knowledge of religious leaders, and that the school is utilizing its resources in ways that most effectively accomplish this purpose." (ATS General Institutional Standard 8.8)

In another document, ATS refers specifically to the function I see as essential to my own work, that of "bridging functions between technology and theological education, between theological curriculum and delivery systems, between teachers and learners…" (ATS ES.4.2.12).

On the ground level for the GTU's effective use of contemporary technology is student learning outcomes. When learning outcomes for a particular course are both concrete and assessable, it is easier to determine the appropriate technology for the class. In my own teaching, I approached technology very differently in the two core courses I taught most recently at PLTS. For my "Living Tradition" course (a hybrid class offered to both residential and online students), I created multimedia presentations that could be viewed online via Moodle, and had students engage in online threaded discussions. Since half of the students were on campus, they gathered with
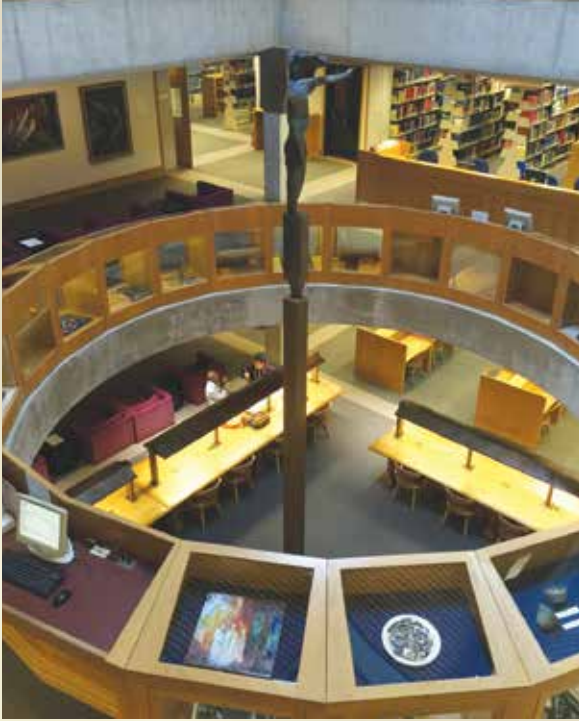
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> *"Technology in today's classroom is only as good as the pedagogy behind it."*
>
> — *Kyle K. Schiefelbein*

me weekly for discussions that were then continued online. On the other hand, the "American Lutheranism" course is offered only to residential students and is primarily discussion-based. Apart from using Moodle to upload course readings, I kept the computer-based technology to a minimum. Rather, I used the classroom furniture as my technology, organizing tables, chairs, and whiteboard in such a way to maximize our ability to discuss the content at hand. Both these courses use technology that originate from the learning outcomes.

An important component to both online and residential courses is the idea of "presence"—how are the students and instructors present to one another in the learning experience? Good course design is no longer restricted by geography and time, and technology helps bridge the gap between time zones and continents.

The desire to increase presence goes beyond the classroom environment to other parts of the educational experience. The GTU library continues to expand its digital collection, and this fall has added virtual reference to its list of services. Students can chat instantly with a reference librarian through the library website and through Moodle. The GTU has provided a live video stream of Commencement for the last two years, as well as for the Judith Berling symposium in May—and provides continuing access to recordings of these events via its website. These video streams of events allow people at a distance to be present here at the GTU to connect with important ways in which religion meets the world.

The GTU is also bridging technology and theological education by creating a new space on campus where instructors and students can experiment with various classroom pedagogies. This fall, the GTU is redesigning the Library Teaching/Computer Lab to serve as an active learning classroom. The redesign involves removing the computers and furniture, and installing movable tables and chairs and multiple presentation monitors. The room will also have the option of adding other technology, including video conferencing. All GTU faculty will be able to receive training and take advantage of this state-of-the-art classroom to create learning spaces for interfaith and ecumenical engagement, not only in their specific classes but also as a model for such engagement in the wider world. I will also be teaching a course focused on effectively incorporating technology into the theological/religious studies classroom, as a way of better preparing our doctoral students for twenty-first-century theological education.

One thing I appreciate about the poster in my office is that it does not suggest that the 16th-century book should be replaced by computer-based technology. At least from my perspective, the book in the photograph serves as one of the many pieces of technology mentioned by the poster. The website serves as the bridge between the book and the virtual museum attendee. I'm exciting to continue working with the faculty and students of the GTU to continue building bridges between modern technologies and theological education today.

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