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Book Reviews

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Editorial: Technology, Learning and the 'Ephesian Moment'

AS COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES continue to proliferate and play an increasingly pervasive role in our daily interactions, we become increasingly accustomed to their implicit promise of immediate access to information and to other people across spatial barriers. This editorial is being written on a train in Germany, but its composition has also involved remotely accessing files on an office computer in Michigan and forwarding copy to a co-editor in England. From the platform of the railway station in Frankfurt I can access my bank balance and manage my account. At Christmas I was able to avoid international shipping charges by shopping for distant relatives at stores close to them but thousands of miles from me. As the internet continues to spread, the flow of new technologies offering distance-free access to information and services also continues - portable global positioning devices, satellite radio, wireless services, text messaging and so on. All of these carry the promise of replacing forms of access to information that depend on location and privileged expert access with instant access by anyone anywhere. Such technologies also hold out the promise of immediate access to people who not so long ago would have been very difficult to contact at short notice because of geographical distance.

Such a shift has obvious relevance to the processes of education. It is said that Albertus Magnus, the great 13th century theologian, would do two things upon arriving at a monastery after a journey: go to the chapel to offer prayers of thanksgiving for safe travel and go to the library to look for books that had not been available in libraries that he had visited before. Today the keen student can not only access more text than she will ever be able to read online, but also search the world's bookstores from the comfort of her own study. It is already necessary to teach students in a structured way the differences between online and print sources and the widely varying degrees of reliability of information found online.

Electronic communication is not, however, merely a faster way of accessing data. It is also other people who are wired to the web. In particular, access to people who are geographically distant has increased to a very significant degree over the past century and a half through an array of technologies as varied as telephones, photography, television, various forms of audio and video recording and satellite communication. Today it is possible, for instance, not merely to arrange for learners of other languages to have pen-friends in a country where the language is spoken, but to have them work on a collaborative web-based project with native speakers in other countries. It is possible for students to conduct long-distance interviews with the authors of books or articles that they read. It is easier than ever before to enable students to put questions directly to people who live a long way away.

This does not, however, imply the communicative utopia suggested by some of the more enthusiastic writing on the educational potentials of information technologies. What is sometimes forgotten amid such enthusiasm is that immediate access to other people does not remove the complexities of interpersonal communication – in fact it can even make communication more difficult. A recent project at an American university connected American students who were learning German with students of English in Germany via email, and required them work collaboratively over a semester as an exercise in intercultural encounter (Julie A. Belz, 'Linguistic Perspectives on the Development of Intercultural Competence in Telecollaboration' in *Language Learning and Technology* 7.2 (2003):68-117 (cited August 26, 2003) available at <http://lt.msu.edu/vol7num2/pdf/belz.pdf>). In this manner each student was able to have direct contact with a native speaker in the country whose language he or she was studying. The leaders of the project found that while some students had enriching experiences, others ended up hating their partners, withdrawing from participation and developing fresh prejudices against Germans. The reasons had a great deal to do with basic cultural

differences in patterns of social interaction. In German conversation, it is normal to express criticism more directly and earlier in a conversation than is the case with typical American communication patterns. In average American conversations, criticism tends to be expressed more indirectly and to be preceded by positive comments. As a result of unawareness of this basic difference in communication styles, some American students concluded that their German counterparts were rude and unsympathetic. It seems likely that some German students likewise had their stereotypes of American students as shallow and insincere reinforced. A number of recent studies of telecollaborative language learning projects have similarly underlined that cultural fault-lines persist in computer-mediated communication and can lead to miscommunication or even resentment and withdrawal on the part of participants. Different attitudes toward the collaborative task because of different institutional settings, educational traditions, grading procedures and levels of individual access to technology can lead to impatience with partners who seem too task-focused and not personable enough or too laid back and not diligent enough, added to the challenge of communicating effectively and sensitively (Julie A. Belz, 'Social Dimensions of Telecollaborative Foreign Language Study' in *Language Learning and Technology* 6.1 (2002):60-81 (cited August 25, 2003) available at <http://llt.msu.edu/vol6num1/pdf/belz.pdf>). Where the difficulties are interpreted by learners as 'typical' of the partner group and their culture, such communication can reinforce or even create negative stereotypes, even as other students in the same class may develop strong relationships and have their image of the other culture grow in positive directions (Gerhard Fischer, *E-mail in Foreign Language Teaching - Towards the Creation of Virtual Classrooms*. (Tübingen, Germany: Stauffenburg Medien, 1998), cited in Robert O'Dowd, 'Understanding the "Other Side": Intercultural Learning in a Spanish-English Email Exchange' in *Language Learning and Technology* 7.2 (2003):118-144, p.121 (cited August 14, 2003) available at <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num2/pdf/odowd.pdf>).

In short, our new technologies of communication can help to bridge physical difference, but do not necessarily remove other kinds of difference between people or ameliorate the challenges of communicating across cultural, social, or religious differences. If anything, the new immediacy promised by electronic communication increases the need for an educational focus on the skills and attitudes necessary to communicate in sensitive, respectful and open-hearted ways across the various kinds of human difference. Immediate access without both the will and the competence to 'love the foreigner as oneself' (Leviticus 19:34) offers new opportunities for concrete resentments between people who were formerly distant abstractions to one another.

Andrew Walls' recent analysis of the historical situation of the worldwide church in terms of cross-cultural relationships suggests a particular need for such a focus within Christian education (Andrew Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002). Walls presents the history of the Christian church as one of continual cross-cultural translation, moving into new and marginal cultural territories and dying away in areas that were once its heartlands. This continuous movement into new cultural settings is not accidental: 'For Christians ... the divine Word is translatable, infinitely translatable. The very words of Christ himself were transmitted in translated form in the earliest documents we have, a fact surely inseparable from the conviction that in Christ, God's own self was translated into human form.'(p.29) Cross-cultural learning is, Walls argues, essential to the history of Christianity, not merely something that resides at its fringes. At the present point in history, he suggests, the church stands before an 'Ephesian moment'. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians calls for a culturally mixed church to grow into a shared maturity. Walls relates Paul's reminder that in union with Christ 'you too are being built together with all the others to a place where God lives through his Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22) to the cultural differences and tensions between Jewish and Hellenistic believers in the early church: each part of the body retains its difference, yet needs the others for maturity: 'The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fulness, dwell. And Christ's completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ' (p.79, alluding to Ephesians 4:13). The particular challenge in the present day arises for Walls from the fact that the Christian church worldwide is becoming more culturally diverse than ever before, with the heartlands

of Christian faith shifting from the West to Africa, Asia and Latin America (even as Christian presence continues in the West), and increasing migration (he cites UN figures suggesting that immigration could push the population of the US to 400 million by 2050). An important question, he suggests, is ‘whether or not the church in all its diversity will demonstrate its unity by the interactive participation of all its culture-specific segments, the interactive participation that is to be expected in a functioning body’ (p.81).

This is not the only reason for Christian education to concern itself with the realities of cross-cultural communication, but it is surely a significant one. It underscores the need to be cautious concerning the promise of immediacy held out by new technologies of communication. Using these technologies in ways that contribute to reconciliation and unity across human fault-lines will require more than technical expertise, and will require more of teachers than setting up the connections and letting learners communicate. Skills such as patient listening and avoidance of judgmental responses, awareness of cultural differences and variations in communication patterns, and a willingness to assume wisdom in one’s interlocutor are as relevant as technical expertise as soon as it is realised that interpersonal communication is, even through an electronic medium, more than the transfer of information. Email, instant messaging and spiritual and moral development are not nearly as far apart from one another as they might at first seem.

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The number of teachers leaving the profession is a cause for concern in the UK, USA and other parts of the world. In their article in this issue, Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline explore the idea of calling and, in particular, a distinction made by Os Guinness between the primary calling to be in relationship to God and a secondary calling or vocation to a particular form or place of service. This distinction, they argue, can provide space for a more realistic view of the classroom which can be of help to both teacher educators and candidates.

John Sullivan’s article on the dynamics of ownership takes our attention from the classroom to the wider context of the faith-based school, college or university. He looks in turn at three kinds of ownership - proprietary, professional and participative – and he argues that each of the three are necessary for Christian institutions and that each is open to abuse if not balanced by the other two. Both of these articles move from exploration of general principles about work and work-places to what they mean for the work of teaching and the work-places of school, college or university. The third article in this issue is concerned from the outset with the curriculum of faith-based schools. Mark Pike responds to a recent criticism by the Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales of independent faith-based schools: that they do not adequately prepare children for life in a wider society that does not share many of their beliefs. Pike argues that such schools are called to provide a form of education for citizenship which is more true to the nature of society than is usually provided by common schools and that they are better placed to do so.

It sometimes seems that one of the few things we are certain about in our contemporary society and in the education we provide for our children and young people is that we cannot be certain of anything. Steve Loomis and Jake Rodriguez analyse different kinds of certainty and uncertainty and they argue against a prevailing skepticism on almost everything and for the claim that God, our knowledge of him and his knowledge of us provide an excellent basis for education.

The dialogue in the last issue of this journal between Michael Hand and John White on whether religious education should be compulsory has stimulated two readers to write letters in response. Their letters appear in this issue and further contributions to the debate are welcome, as are responses to any of the articles published.

John Shortt & David I. Smith