

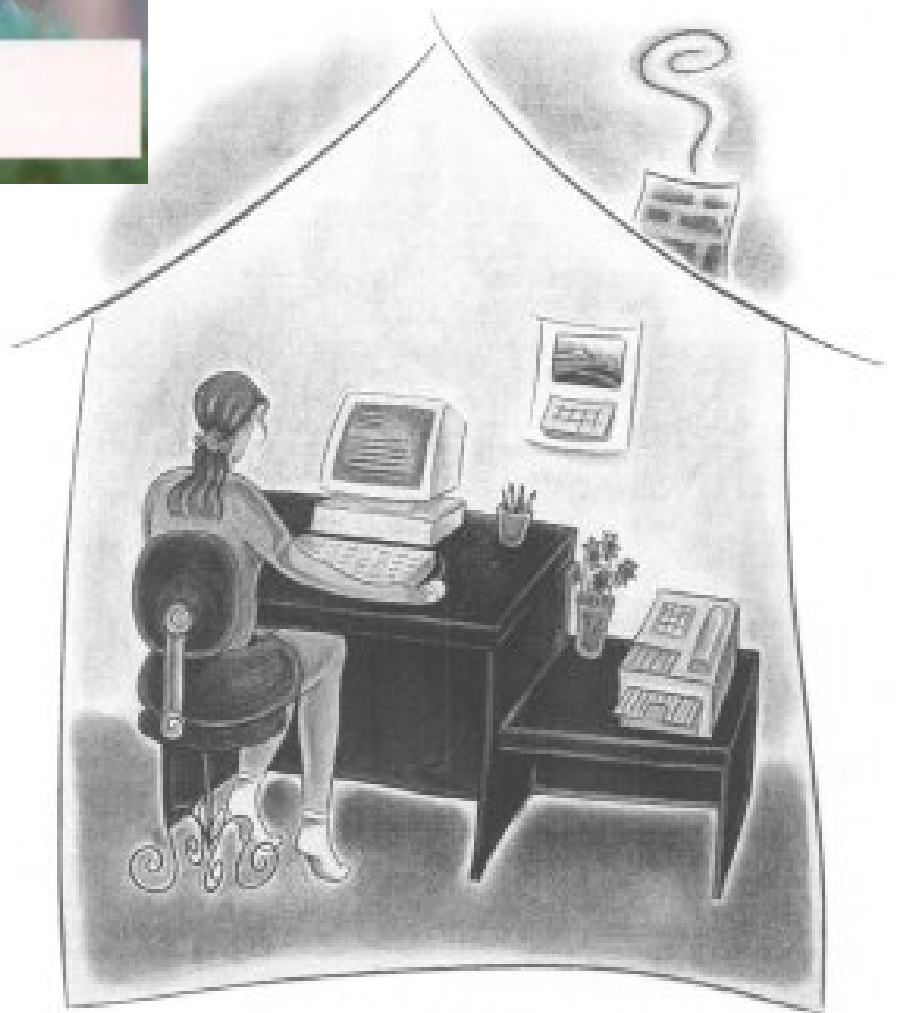


Connected Learning:

An Emerging Opportunity
for Lifelong Learning for
Ministry

by
A. Christopher Hammon
and
Vicki L. Hollon

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Connected Learning: An Emerging Opportunity for Lifelong Learning for Ministry

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In the midst of the current whirlwind of change that is energized by the shift to a systems perspective, the collapse of distance, the paradigm shifts in how we work and learn, and a blurring information explosion, we are challenged to make learning an intentional part of our professional practice as ministers. A 2001 report issued by the Alban Institute recognized the need to develop new and innovative pathways for ministers to learn and connect and to develop safe environments in which to explore innovative approaches for continuing professional educa-

alone do not provide an interactive environment that facilitates the social process of learning, including reflection on best practices among peers. Also, books do not always provide the most current information available.

Fortunately, there are new information technologies that provide the opportunity for highly interactive continuing education that can overcome these hindrances of time, distance, and availability. Digital and computer-mediated communications technologies, such as the Internet, dramatically diminish any



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tion. Easy to say, but in our research related to continuing education for ministry three common hindrances were frequently identified as undermining the best of our intentions: time, distance, and availability.

One common practice for overcoming these hindrances has been to employ an ancient information technology known as a book. While this technology has become more widespread and more cost effective through the years, it is no longer the approach for overcoming these hindrances. Books

challenges caused by geographical distance. These new opportunities alter our perceptions of when and how education can be pursued and conducted because it is no longer necessary for teachers and students to be in the same geographical space in order to connect or interact.

Formation of Online Communities

There is a long educational tradition of gathering in community in order to share resources, dialogue, and learning. Modern universities are just one exam-

ple of this. The connected world of cyberspace has presented a new dimension for human social organization around learning. Community formation in virtual reality has already shown that it has significant potential for redefining community around shared values and interests rather than geographical proximity. In a world that realizes the value of having diverse perspectives in the process of problem solving, the formation of learning communities in cyberspace presents several key opportunities. One of the original purposes for the development of the technology underlying the Internet was to facilitate the work of researchers located in different geographical locations and to enable them to collaborate. It was recognized that researchers from different academic traditions could provide alternative ways of seeing and solving problems. As a collaborative community they can generate significant potential for innovation and creativity.

The new information technologies also offer numerous opportunities for ministry practitioners to be reflective learners, developing personal mastery similar to the way artists develop their artistry. We have discovered that best practices, or solutions, often emerge within the context of collaborative reflection. New technologies—such as the Internet, wireless networks, streaming media, interactive conferencing, and immediate messaging—make it possible for ministers to gather and evaluate a situation in a very timely way without having to find (and wait for) a time when they can gather face-to-face. When multiple perspectives are connected, issues can be clarified and possible solutions can be expanded. This creates opportunities for reflection and awareness of one's underlying assumptions and how those assumptions influence decisions. A connected network of colleagues can provide a support system in the midst of a challenging experience.

A critical dimension of this reflective collaboration is the perception that one is in a safe environ-

ment for sharing one's perspectives and ideas. In our research regarding lifelong learning, we discovered that it is possible for groups composed of persons from different parts of the country and different denominational affiliations working together online to sustain this sense of safe environment. In evaluating the reflective dialogue of an online seminar one pastor commented, "I appreciated everyone's insight and honest comments. I thought many of the heartfelt conversations revealed a real need for open dialogue. I wonder how much of that would have occurred in a face-to-face meeting" (used with permission).

Changing the Way We Learn

Don Tapscott (1998) in *Growing Up Digital* observed that the digital revolution provides students and educators with "a new, more powerful, and more effective learning paradigm" (p.142). He noted several paradigm shifts in this movement: (a) the move from sequential, linear learning to nonsequential, interactive, hypermedia learning. (b) A shift from instruction oriented learning to construction and discovery, which is also to say "a shift away from pedagogy... to the creation of learning partnerships and learning cultures" (p. 143). (c) The move away from teacher-centered instruction and toward learner-centered education focused on the experience of the learners, the merger of learning and entertainment, and the stimulation of learner motivation. (d) An emphasis on learning how to navigate information and learning how to learn, including how to synthesize and assimilate, in lieu of just absorbing the material.

It is recognized in this new learning paradigm that each learner is responsible for identifying his or her learning needs and for taking charge of creating learning situations for meeting those needs. This shift also creates the need to develop learning approaches that help individuals identify their specific learning needs and to meet those needs in light

of their own circumstances, gifts, and personal learning styles. The possibilities for connecting with others with similar learning needs are expanded as ministers utilize new technologies for connecting with each other.

Connected Learning Opportunities

Online Conferences and Workshops

One of the key opportunities emerging in the use of the new technologies is the opportunity to participate in online conferences and workshops to expand or update one's knowledge and skills. One advantage of online education is not having to incur the time and expense of travel to participate in a conference or workshop. Another is the schedule flexibility.

The Wayne E. Oates Institute has been offering online conferences and workshops since 1998. A typical online conference offers participants 10-15 presentations that may be accessed anytime (24/7) throughout the conference according to the participants' needs. The presentations are accompanied by interactive opportunities that include Live Discussions with presenters and ongoing email discussions. The presentations may be text-based, streaming audio, streaming video, or a combination of all three.

Online conferences are generally developed as large group events that offer the opportunity to interact with presenters and network with a large group of participants. Since they generally involve a larger number of presentations, conference participants may choose those that specifically meet their needs and file others for future reference.

The cost to participate in an online conference or workshop has remained relatively low with registration fees that are typically less than face-to-face conferences plus there are no travel expenses. Even though online conferences do not require travel away from home and office or even across town, participation in an online conference should be

planned for and calendared because, like any conference, they are time intensive. An online conference may include as much as one presentation and one Discussion per day.

Variations on the online conference include smaller scale online workshops that feature fewer presentations and stand alone presentations or discussions.

Online Seminars

In 2003 the Wayne E. Oates Institute introduced a new Connected Learning approach. The online seminar was developed to provide a short term, online approach for reflective learning with colleagues. The structure of these 3-week, online learning opportunities is to use one presented resource per week for reflective interaction with a small group of peers. This dialogue is facilitated and primarily uses email. Like other online education events, the online seminar provides the opportunity to participate from any location according to each person's convenience of schedule while learning from presented material, a faculty facilitator, a process of self-reflection on one's own professional experience, and the interaction of ideas as colleagues reflect on their experience in practice.

Online Classes, Certificates, and Degrees

As the new technologies have evolved and presented opportunities for online and teleconferenced classes held at a distance, a number of theological schools and continuing education organizations have begun to offer online classes. These classes frequently combine lecture presentations that are either text-based, streaming audio-video, or broadcast live utilizing a teleconference format with student-teacher interaction via email or discussion forum. Typically these classes are term-length in duration and may be audited as a stand-alone class or taken for credit to be applied to a certificate or degree program. Be-

cause of the academic nature of these classes the cost to participate remains relatively high, as registration tends to parallel an institution's per hour tuition fees.

Blended Approaches

Another new approach that is emerging is the Blended Approach, which combines a traditional face-to-face gathering with some form of an online learning opportunity, such as the online seminar. The advantage of this approach is that it combines the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the extended reflective learning opportunity of the online environment along with the convenience and accessibility of online education. However, this approach does require the time and cost of travel for at least one face-to-face meeting.

Connected Learning Communities

One of the most exciting opportunities now emerging is the Connected Learning Community that forms

Authors:

A. Christopher Hammon, D.Min., is the Online Developer for the Wayne E. Oates Institute and the editor of the Wayne E. Oates Library Collection and the Oates Journal. A specialist in continuing education for ministry, his educational background is in pastoral theology and pastoral care and counseling as well as philosophy of science and educational technologies. He also currently serves as a board member for the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM).

Rev. Vicki Hollon, D.Min., is the Executive Director of the Wayne E. Oates Institute and has been in this role since 1996. Vicki's background is in education and specifically she has been involved in numerous capacities with adult education. In addition to her role with the Oates Institute she leads workshops and retreats. Formerly, as an ordained minister, Vicki served as a pastoral counselor and prior to that was a hospital chaplain.

Together they collaborated on a Doctor of Ministry project and co-authored thesis, *Thriving in the Whirlwind: Connected Learning as an Approach to Lifelong Learning for Ministry*, through Drew University Theological School's Global Online D.Min. Program. The project was partially funded by a research grant from the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry.

when ministers connect to support, encourage, and learn from one another over a period of time. The new technologies are transforming what has been perceived as an ideal into a practical reality.

Connected Learning: Some Definitions

- **Distance Education:** An approach that emphasizes transmitting knowledge and skills from teachers to students who are not present in the same geographical space. This is also known as distance teaching. In general application, this has served as a virtual microphone in the classroom enabling institutions of learning to broadcast information to a larger audience.
- **Distance Learning:** The practice of learners reaching out to geographically distant resources, including teachers and mentors, to stimulate their learning process. This opportunity has rapidly accelerated the practice of informal lifelong learning among many adults as they have increasingly turned to the resources of the World Wide Web as needed to learn about products, places, health, interests, ideas, and technologies. This opportunity has taken the concept of the community library as a learning resource to a new level.
- **Connected Learning:** A collaborative learning process that uses cyberspace to connect learners with themselves, other learners, teachers, mentors, facilitators, and learning resources while transcending the need for participants to share the same time or space. Connected Learning is an opportunity made possible by the convergence of new technologies and new educational methodologies to connect learning opportunities with practice to meet individual needs within the context of a diverse community of colleagues.