

Can We Disciple Students Effectively via Online Learning?

Pastor Glyn Williams (Mukhanyo Theological College)

Introduction

While online learning provides a way for students to study from home or other locally convenient contexts, there are significant concerns about its effectiveness when it comes to discipleship.

Personal background: I've been a student and/or teacher in all learning contexts (i.e. contact, correspondence, online, short courses, church-based learning). Currently working on my MTh focussing on distance theological education where I look at the history of TE, current praxes, and theology, as I evaluate MTC's current praxis to see how we can improve.

In conducting this research, pastors keep telling me that the biggest problem they have with students when they come out of seminary is spiritual immaturity. Irrespective of the mode. Discussions with students reveal that it's lacking in all contexts, but most especially in correspondence and online contexts.

Recent research of students in a leading South African university found that 68% of their students prefer in-class, face-to-face interactions over online.

Can We Disciple Students Effectively via Online Learning?

How you answer that question depends largely on how you answer the following two questions:

1. What is the goal of theological education? _____
2. What is the goal of discipleship? _____

Both questions should lead to the same answer – spiritual formation, Christlikeness in character and behaviour, piety, or holiness.

Al Mohler said that the ultimate goal for all study of God's Word is holiness. He noted that theological education is merely the means to the end of holiness, and the two must never be confused.

“Books, classes, lectures, teachers, schools, colleges, universities, seminaries—even the most godly—are simply means, not ends. Means to what? Means to the preaching of the gospel and the fulfilment of the Great Commission? Yes. Means to the edification of the saints and growth in godliness? Yes. Means for planting churches and feeding churches? Yes. But even those are penultimate. The end is holiness.”

Passages to consider

- Luke 6:39-40
- Galatians 4:18-19
- 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5-16 – The qualifications of elders and deacons are primarily about character, only two are related to skills (i.e. able to teach and able to manage his household well).

How does one achieve holiness in a discipleship or theological education context?

Who should be involved in the discipleship process?

How Does Online Learning Hinder or Help the Discipleship Process?

- Help
 - Improved communication (if used properly)
 - Cost-effective – less need to travel
 - Accessibility – we can disciple people over greater distances
 - Distribution of materials – videos, guides, books, etc.
- Hinder
 - Can lie or misrepresent self without being caught
 - Disconnected from other students (personal experience)
 - Disconnected from the lecturer/mentor/etc. (personal experience)
 - Message boards, chat rooms, and WhatsApp are insufficient for proper dialogue
 - Too many online distractions
 - Takes more work and commitment from both sides
 - Cannot observe biblical behaviour
 - Lack of accountability
 - Technical difficulties – connection, data, computer literacy
 - Ensuring confidentiality – especially in a group context

Theological institutions must consider spiritual formation as its primary task, involving all of the institution – the students, teachers, faculty, staff, and governing bodies – whether face-to-face or online.

Suggestions for Using Technology in Discipleship

Even though technology can simplify the discipleship process, you need to follow some best practices to gain the maximum benefit.

1. **Recognise that Online is a Tool:** It is not your primary tool but should be supplementary or complementary to the other tools. In some situations, it may be the best tool available (e.g. when the disciple is in a country/location where there is no church or mature Christian to disciple), but that should be the exception rather than the rule.
2. **Remember that the Students are People:** They are not just faces on a screen. Be genuinely interested in their lives, challenges, and needs, and remember that those things will affect their interaction with you. Help students to understand this too as the

distance between you can lead them to think of you simply as the institution and not as a person who is interested in their personal lives.

3. **Establish Clear Communication Guidelines:** Establish rules that a disciple and discipler should follow, and update them regularly to stay current and efficient. For example:
 - a. Schedule regular times to engage;
 - b. Send any documents before the scheduled meeting;
 - c. Be on time for appointments;
 - d. Be prompt in responding to messages;
 - e. Maintain strict deadlines;
 - f. Do not disclose sensitive information without permission from its owner;
 - g. Discuss relevant topics;
 - h. Turn off all electronic distractions – e.g. devices, notifications, etc.
4. **Set Clear Expectations:** Set realistic goals without trying to cover too much in a short time. What should your online discipleship programme be? Establish SMART goals.
5. **Encourage Regular Check-Ins:** Have regular one-on-one discipleship sessions to discuss personal spiritual issues and concerns and to review progress. These check-ins should be honest and discuss feelings. How do you evaluate the progress? What would you like to improve? What goals should you establish or adjust?
6. **Organise In-person Meetings:** Discipleship is about learning from and imitating the teacher, therefore students should be able to witness those things in person. Schedule weekend retreats, day trips, other in-person events, or even a short-term internship. These interactions help strengthen relationships and build trust and community.
7. **Build Rapport:** Both parties should demonstrate an interest in cooperation and stay concentrated during virtual meetings. Practise active listening, that is, engaging with the speaker to gain a deeper understanding of their message. Take responsibility for your obligations. Regularly show up for meetings. The disciple should feel comfortable asking questions, providing feedback, and expressing doubts. Respond to them promptly to keep the programme going.
8. **Involve the Student's Church/Pastor:** The College alone cannot accomplish the task of spiritual formation. Involve the sending church, pastor, elders, or another accountability partner (in the case where the student is the pastor). What goes on there impacts the students.