Use of learning technologies in the Masters of Divinity programme

Faculty of Theology | Department of Practical Theology

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Learning activity:
Programme redesign

Learning technology:
SUNLearn

Context

Subject Area and Background Overview

The Master of Divinity (MDiv) in Church Ministry and Church Leadership (55735:889) is a full year, multi-module programme in the Department of Practical Theology that focuses on training theology students for various facets of ministry. In 2014 the programme had 23 enrolled students (8 female and 15 male) between the ages of 22 and 32, most of whom had completed their necessary Bachelors in Divinity (BDiv) or equivalent degrees at this same faculty.

Students are expected to be available for a full day of classes from 08h00 to 16h30 and are expected to attend every lecture, seminar or other face-to-face classroom scenario, as well as off-campus excursions and activities. The learning environment also consists of the university based learning platform *SUNLearn* where the students are expected to complete and submit assessments, group activities and reflective exercises (Nell, 2014A:3).

Topic, Intended Learning Outcomes and Established Practice

Primarily and administratively situated in the Practical Theology department this programme incorporates all of the departments of the Faculty of Theology, namely Practical Theology and Missiology, Old and New Testament Studies, and Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology. In so doing the programme, using a "hermeneutical-rhetorical meta-theoretical framework", provides the student with a comprehensive knowledge-integration of their previous theological BDiv content with a specific focus on equipping them to use it responsibly and professionally as "ministers, clergy, pastors, lay workers, pastoral care givers and pastoral therapists for the ministry" (Stellenbosch University, 2014:44&45).

The programme consists of three main practical-theological themes, namely *Pathos, Logos* and *Ethos*. Six core modules (120 credits) are grouped under these main themes and these modules are further subdivided into (30) smaller practical-theological ministerial themes (referred to as teaching blocks in the faculty colloquia). Teaching blocks are individually assessed and forms part of the core module's credit load. A research component (60 credits) is included as a seventh core module. The students are required to complete a research assignment of 50 pages in any of the faculty department in order to further develop their skills in research methodology and knowledge of theology as science.

The programme (180 credits in total) is designed and structured in order to equip the students for professional ministry. Each block is structured according to the needs of the lecturer with regards to days of face-to-face classroom time, frequency and type of assessment and use of *SUNLearn*.

The students complete a 48-hour outcomes-based assessment at the end of the programme. This is structured in such a way to help them with the integration of abovementioned outcomes into their knowledge base.

Student overview and role of other course users

In 2014 there were 23 enrolled students in the MDiv-programme. Of these 23 students 21 completed their undergraduate (BDiv) degrees at this same faculty and were therefore familiar with the building, the lecturers and the technological infrastructure (the faculty has its own computer area where students can have access to desktop computers throughout the day and night). The other two students completed a faculty-based postgraduate diploma (PGDip) to gain access to this programme, they were therefore also familiar with the building and the available infrastructure- but perhaps not the lecturers as much. The 21 BDiv students had experienced both the university-wide transition from *WebCT* to *Blackboard* and from *Blackboard* to *SUNLearn*, and therefore knew how to navigate the latest learning platform. It is unknown whether the two PGDip students were familiar with the use of learning platforms, but they seemed to manage with the help of the lecturers and their peers.

Other programme participants included a programme coordinator and convenor situated in the Practical Theology department, 19 lecturers from the different departments in the faculty, and a university-based technical support person. Later in the year a university-based advisor from the Centre for Teaching and Learning as well as a faculty-based technical assistant and assessor (currently known as the blended learning coordinator) joined the programme to provide advice and feedback during the programme evaluation. The programme coordinator, blended learning coordinator and blended learning advisor formed the workgroup.

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The challenge and possible advantages of the integration of technology

From the provided information it is clear that the MDiv-programme is a fully loaded and intricately structured academic programme that attempts to provide students with "*a theological understanding of congregational ministry and the distinctive character of being a church in various contexts.*" (Nell, 2014A:2) By making use of all the theological departments in the faculty and by using the student's undergraduate studies as a knowledge base the programme endeavours to provide students with theological knowledge-integration that will be an integral part of their success in their future professions.

The abovementioned view is a theoretically sound rationale but it is practically quite challenging to structure coherently and cohesively. Although the six core modules are structured neatly according to the three main practical-theological themes of *Pathos*, *Logos* and *Ethos* the smaller teaching blocks, with their weekly or bi-weekly shift of lecturer and theological theme, create a sense of structural and academic disjointedness and incoherence. As every teaching block has its own structure, assignment and form of assessment that contributes to the credit load of the overhead module it also leads to a very production-laden programme, which in turn can lead to the issue regarding quantity versus quality teaching and learning.

To address the structural and academic disjointedness and incoherence, as well as the issue regarding production and assessment overload (which affects students and lecturers alike), the workgroup decided to make better use of the available university learning platform *SUNLearn*. By using *SUNLearn* more productively and strategically as a teaching and learning tool they envisioned to create:

- A virtual classroom that would run parallel, synchronous and asynchronous with the face-to-face classroom to help create a multitude of communication, teaching and learning spaces.
- A standardised, practical layout for every teaching block in order to create a unified and easy to use structure that would make navigation simpler and create a sense of academic cohesion.
- An opportunity for the different lecturers to be able to see what and how the other is teaching, where there might be overlap in academic material and therefore collaboration in terms of integrated reading material and/or assessments that would lessen the production burden on students and lecturers.

The workgroup therefore motivated lecturers to make as much use of *SUNLearn* as practically possible in order to address the challenges and achieve these envisioned goals.

Learning and Assessment Activities

Educational approach

The MDiv-programme is a full time programme that requires students to be present at the classes assigned to the specific teaching blocks. *SUNLearn* is used, according to an instructional design model, parallel and synchronously with these face-to-face classes to act as a complimentary teaching and learning platform. It is structured, organised and implemented therefore in order to help produce the programme outcomes, as well as to address the challenges of the programme.

Learning and assessment activities

The learning and assessment activities incorporated into the learning platform should be carefully chosen and thoughtfully implemented in order to assist students with knowledge acquirement and the use/development of necessary skills (Engelbrecht, 2003:41). It is in these spaces that the students critically engage with theory and praxis to create a profession-based skill set. With this in mind each teaching block chose and implemented the necessary teaching practice and assessment activity to best accomplish this task. Although the different blocks may use similar activities they did so with a different rationale and also assessed the activities according to different criteria.

Activities in this programme consisted of:

- Watching videos that pertain to the academic content.
- Reflecting on classroom discussions and literature by using the 'Workshop' activity.
- Writing blog posts and journal entries (using the 'Forum' activity) to reflect on their experience of the literature and classroom discussions.
- Group orals that were presented in class and could be loaded onto *SUNLearn*.
- Traditional assignments reflecting on and researching the academic

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content presented.

These activities often had the dual purpose of being a formative learning tool as well as a summative assessment tool. They were therefore incorporated into the teaching practice but also served to help students receive marks as the teaching block progressed. This was very well received by the students as it challenged them to learn and think in different ways, but also diffuses the academic pressure of producing one big assignment at the end of the block.

Some teaching blocks did not make use of the learning platform on an activity level but only as a literature repository. Although this made access to the literature easier it did not help create the envisioned multitude of communication, teaching and learning spaces. The workgroup found that showing these lecturers the different teaching and assessment styles implemented on *SUNLearn* helped them to see the potential uses of different activities and realise the easy implementation of them.

Feedback practice and student self-regulation

Feedback was provided directly via the learning platform activity in the form of a mark. Very few lecturers provided comprehensive feedback as a learning tool due to time constraints. Where the activities constituted the bulk of their mark allocation (in the case of a traditional assignment or lengthy blog post) feedback was provided more comprehensively on the activity. Feedback was also often provided orally in class and gave students the opportunity to respond to the feedback given, but there were no formal activities created to implement student self-regulation (i.e. the opportunity to resubmit work after the first feedback or the use of peer-review as a summative feedback tool). There was only one formal instance of the use of peer-review as the opportunity for the students to provide each other with feedback.

Feedback and response to feedback was lacking in the programme structure and something that is being addressed by motivating lecturers to make more use of *SUNLearn* activities that make use of immediate feedback or peer-reviewed feedback.

Learning Environment

Learning settings

Learning activities took place within the classroom where lectures and face-to-face discussions took place. For those who made use of the learning platform *SUNLearn* became a complimentary learning setting that brought the teaching and learning activities into the outside world of the library, home, coffee shop, etc. Students responded well to the individual blocks who made integrated use of *SUNLearn* into the classroom activity, and the participating lecturers found it to be a useful cohesive link to indicate the coherence of what was taught in the class and then assessed or discussed at another stage.

One of the stumbling blocks for more integrated cooperation between the actual classroom and the learning platform seemed to be the lecturer's interpretation of the use of the learning platform. Although many used *SUNLearn* for assessment, discussions and literature repositories it was not seen as a classroom teaching aid or lecture organiser and students did not often see the lecturers physically using the platform (i.e. in a classroom setting or doing the assessment in real-time using *SUNLearn*).

In order to structure the entire programme and each teaching block for optimal classroom use the programme workgroup designed a standardised, practical layout for structuring each teaching block (this framework is created by the technical assistant to the programme, lecturers are responsible for adding the necessary activities and resources). In so doing the workgroup envisioned to achieve an easy to use online module framework which had the teaching, learning and assessment activities embedded. This would mean that the lecturer would not need to create separate class notes but could add it to, teach and distribute from the learning platform. Because each block is structured similarly every student would know exactly where to look for the necessary information or activity. The *SUNLearn* site therefore becomes the module framework, the classroom and the discussion place-all in one convenient location.

This layout and structure has recently been implemented. According to informal polls and feedback from the students it seems to work well, creating a sense of overall structure, cohesion and coherence of the fragmented programme. Lecturers have also found it very helpful as it provides them

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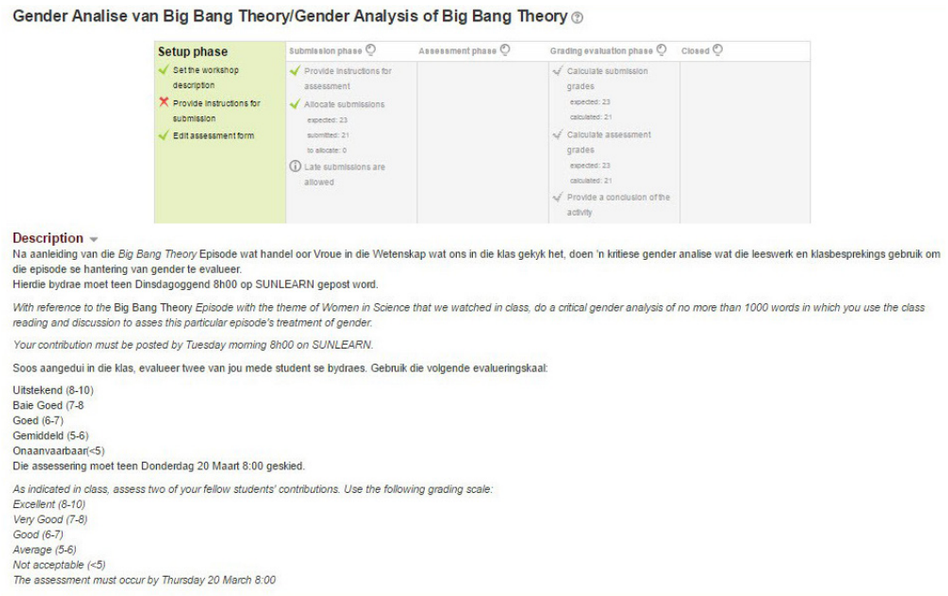
with organisational structure. It also lessens their administration, as their module frameworks are organised and created for them and they simply have to add the necessary activities and resources to different sections.

Collaborative settings

There are not many collaborative activities formally used, apart from a few classroom group sessions and a collaborative peer-review activity



One of the workgroup's goals of using *SUNLearn* is to give the lecturers an overview of each one's teaching plan in order to provide insight into where (if at all) some teaching blocks can collaborate in terms of reading material, assignments and assessments.

Although this has become easily possible through the programme's simple *SUNLearn* structure and even though it carries some advantages for lessening teaching and learning loads, not many lecturers have made use of this aspect. This could be due to the fear that their subject would have to share valuable time with another or due to time constraints in restructuring the two different teaching blocks into one assessment or assignment. Currently the only solution seems to be for the blended teaching and learning coordinator to initiate and facilitate the process with the different lecturers.

Technology resources

Most students have their own laptops and/or tablets and are encouraged to use them in the classroom when necessary (i.e. for *SUNLearn*-based activities, access to reading material, use of search engines, etc.). A big challenge is the lack of Wi-Fi in the classrooms and plans are being made to remedy this.

Although *SUNLearn* has many activities available for teaching and learning not all of them are usable on a postgraduate level, i.e. 'Choice', 'Questionnaire' and some forms of the 'Quiz'. There are mainly 5 *SUNLearn* tools that are recommended for this programme:

- Turnitin Assignment 2
- Wiki
- Workshop
- Survey
- Forum

These 5 are the most conducive to theological teaching and learning at postgraduate level. By using mostly these activities students and lecturers become quite skilled in the activity's functioning and problem-solving. Informal feedback has been positive in this regard.

Support challenges

One of the biggest challenges to the programme's use of *SUNLearn* was the inability of many lecturers to functionally set up and use the activities and tools. This has been addressed by appointing a blended learning coordinator for the faculty who also oversees the MDiv-programme's learning platform. This has also proven to be an asset to the students in terms of problem-solving.

Conclusion

The use of a learning platform has proven to be advantageous for the MDiv-programme as it provides a centralised teaching and learning platform that is not bound to a physical location. In this way teaching and learning is a continuous process that stretches farther than a face-to-face lecture and transitions into the already technologically engaged lives of

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the students. It also provides all users with a centralised communication space. Technical and e-learning support seems to be the one main factor in making the use of *SUNLearn* in the MDiv-programme practical and sustainable. The presence of an e-learning coordinator who works closely with the programme lecturers and their curricula, could therefore be quite helpful in a similar programme.

A big stumbling block is creating a willingness of all teaching users to partake in the restructuring of the programme. This is imperative if the programme is to function optimally in different teaching and learning spaces. Regular feedback, even informally, is crucial in assessing a) what each lecturer and teaching block needs to achieve their teaching outcomes and b) how each student holistically experiences and learns from the different e-learning tools. It is important that the entire programme works together to create a space for holistic and critical knowledge and skill acquirement.

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