Integrating Salt & Light in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT: The distinctiveness of Christian higher education and the positive outcomes of integrating faith and learning has been a continuous publication topic. With recent technology advances and increasing demand for distance learning, Christian professors are now searching for effective ways to integrate salt and light into their online courses. This article will address two topics. First, it reviews scholarship to discern whether professors not only have a spiritual calling but also a professional obligation to educate in a manner that is broader than discipline alone. Second, it offers best practices for integrating salt and light into online higher education business courses.

INTRODUCTION

Similar to the way Jesus would often explain deeper spiritual truths using commonly understood cultural traditions and everyday items, Christians commonly reference the terms of salt and light with the dual meaning of being both physical items and spiritual metaphors. Physically, light illuminates. It allows people to see their environment and themselves more clearly. Biblically, light is used to reference Jesus (John 8:12) and a revelation of the truth (Acts 26:18). Salt, in its physical state, adds flavor, melts ice, removes dead skin particles, kills weeds, removes stains, etc. (SaltWorks, 2017). Spiritually, Jesus calls Christians the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13) and instructs them to keep the qualities associated with salt (Mark 9:50). Using Jesus' instructions to Christians as a starting point, this article will first review the literature to discern whether professors have a professional obligation as well as a spiritual calling to educate students more broadly than in disciplinary knowledge alone. Second, the article reviews best practices for ways professors can intentionally integrate spiritual salt and light into online higher education business courses.

The Purpose of Higher Education

To discern whether professors have a professional obligation to intentionally educate in a manner that is broader than discipline alone, this section reviews literature that examines the purpose of a college education. In the late 1800s, John Henry Newman (1996) asserted that the aim of a university was not to instruct, which he defined as simply having students commit methods or rules to memory. The aim of a university, according to Newman, was as a place of education, a place for cultivation of the mind and formation of a character that lasts throughout life. A century later, Whitehead (1967) echoed Newman's thoughts by suggesting that the real purpose of education is to inspire, motivate, and guide students to a whole-person development. He states, "There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations" (p. 6). Holmes (1987) also contends that education should be more about who people are (or can become) versus what they do. He encourages professors not to ask what students can do with the material. Instead, professors should ask what type of person the student will become because of their experience in wrestling with the material.

The Carnegie Foundation provides several insights related to both undergraduate education in general and undergraduate business education specifically. First, they state that the central aim of a college education is to shape the minds and character of students so they can responsibly engage and contribute to their world, regardless of their major.

> The undergraduate experience is a time of transition when students should not only acquire the knowledge and skills they need to make their way after gradua-

tion, but also expand their intellectual horizons, come to appreciate perspectives that differ from their own, and ultimately gain a sense of the kinds of contributions they want to make to the world. (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011, p. 163)

Specifically referring to undergraduate business students, the Carnegie Foundation asserts:

> They need to achieve at least a provisional sense of direction and meaning, to reflect in a disciplined and informed way on their life choices, and to develop commitments consistent with their examined values and convictions. And their professional and personal judgment should be informed by insights into themselves and others as well as an understanding of and commitment to the ethical standards and social significance of their professional roles. (Colby et al., 2011, p. 88)

A central theme running through these classic works and respected experts' statements is that the purpose of higher education encompasses more than gaining discipline-specific knowledge. Higher education should be focused on the whole person, including emphasis on the formation of character and a unified worldview. Therefore, if the ultimate educational aim is the cultivation of judgement in which business students can understand and balance business goals and issues with a mature and well-rounded worldview, then it can be reasoned that professors do have a professional obligation to integrate relevant matters of faith into business courses.

In line with the literature reviewed, Christian higher education institutions also generally espouse that integration of faith and learning is a professional responsibility. According to Azusa Pacific University's *Faith Integration Faculty Guidebook* (2013), "The instructor's work is 'faith integration' and the intended outcome is the "wholistic spiritual formation" of the learners" (p. 4). The guidebook also states the goal of integrating faith components with academics is to impact students and encourage development of a more comprehensive worldview.

Outcomes of Faith and Learning Integration

Literature regarding Christian higher education and the positive outcomes of integrating faith (i.e. salt and light) and learning has been a continuous publication topic. Hegland (1954) proposed that Christian education results in a more value-added education due to the faith and learning component. Holmes (1987) added that faith and learning is what makes Christian higher education distinctive. More recently, Burton and Nwosu (2003) stated, "This integration affects all aspects of life and learning included in liberal

arts education. Ideally, integrated learning leads to integration of faith in all aspects of a person's life and character" (p. 102). Harris (2004) agreed stating, "Integration, then, goes beyond the intellectual and spiritual benefit of a satisfying and coherent worldview. It is practical" (p. 35). McCoy (2014) asserted that integration of faith and learning can connect students' values and goals, thus preparing students to be professional, faithful servants in their disciplines. Finally, Azusa Pacific University's *Faith Integration Faculty Guidebook* (2013) states, "For students in a Christian university classroom, learning to think critically will deliberately include skills for doing faith integration" (p. 7).

Christian higher education is set apart from other institutions by modeling, mentoring, and administering a faith-based curriculum. Professors in Christian higher education institutions strive to model Christian values, mentor students, and provide academic rigor and relevance while integrating salt and light into course materials. This unique educational experience challenges students to dig deeper into understanding both course content and Christian principles. The goal is to provide opportunities for students to think critically and holistically and to apply learned skills within a personal set of Christian values. Burton and Nwosu (2003) support the importance of modeling and mentoring within a faith-integrated curriculum and suggest that students appreciate learning activities "that challenged them to take a deeper look at Christian principles within the context of their chosen profession" (p. 130). Together, these writings suggest Christian higher education is distinctive and works to impact the whole person by providing opportunities for students to mature and learn both spiritually and academically.

Limitations

While the research supports various benefits to faith and learning integration, there are also implications that should be considered. Edgell (2010) argues that the following are implications to be considered with faith integration: 1) growing in faith is not a rebellion against one's faith beliefs, 2) not all learning processes are defining moments, and 3) faith formation and integration is expansion into other areas of life. Harris (2004) continues the idea of implications that should be considered by suggesting the importance of taking faith integration and learning seriously as well as learning to understand the meanings of salt and light. Only then can the educator and the student collaborate in a student-centered learning process that supports faith integration.

Challenges of Integrating Salt and Light

Practical implementation of modeling, mentoring, and administering a faith-infused curriculum can prove chal-

lenging, especially for business professors. Dulaney et al. (2015) state that there are a limited number of business curriculum textbooks that give guidance in integrating a Christian perspective. This places the bulk of the responsibility on the professor. Harris (2004) suggests that there are two requirements that are essential for successful integration: coherence and consistency. Coherence provides for an entire set of knowledge fitting together to a whole view through facts learned via experiments, basic assumptions, observations, etc. Consistency is the idea that "the new knowledge must be consistent with what we already know" (Harris, 2004, p. 2). Experienced professors in Christian higher education who teach seated classes "already know" or usually have some experience incorporating faith into their courses. The "new knowledge" being sought after due to technology advances and increasing demand for distance learning is how to carry out Jesus' command in Matthew 5:13-16 to be salt and light while instructing and interacting with students online.

Online Course Elements

There are several elements within an online course that provide opportunities for professors to integrate salt and light. According to best practices, a good online course incorporates a variety of activities to address the different strengths and learning styles of students (Jung, 2015). Incorporating a variety of deliverables as well as multiple opportunities to interact online also encourages student engagement. Key elements that contribute to building online professor-to-student as well as student-to-student relationships include creating a sense of community; incorporating videos, discussion posts, and written assignments; and providing feedback. Each of these components offers potential moments to connect with students and integrate salt and light into an online course.

Site Development & Navigation

The precursor to incorporating spiritual salt and light into an online course is to first create a user-friendly course that is both attractive and intuitive to navigate. A well-maintained and contemporary looking course site gives instant credibility to the professor. The reverse is also true. A dated looking or bare-bones site, or a site with functionality issues can give students the impression the professor has limited interest in them and the course. Since students are more inclined to interact with the professor and each other within a well-managed course, creating a professional and user-friendly course site is a prerequisite if students are to believe the professor is competent and cares.

Community

"People learn more and learn more deeply in community than in isolation" (Jung, 2015, p. 29). While few people would take issue with this quote, there are those who question whether community can be fostered in an online environment. However, research would suggest that community, which forms through shared experiences, is no longer solely defined by in-person interaction. Studies have shown that the media and the Internet mediate a sense of shared experiences without individuals needing to be physically present in the same location at the same time.

According to Edmunds and Turner (2005), the first distance community was created in the 1960s by media that connected people in developed countries with each other and the events happening around the globe. Similarly, Volkmer's (2006) international study conducted in nine different countries (Australia, Austria, The Czech Republic, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States) also found that people in distant locations who had access to international communication and news shared common experiences and memories. His findings showed that "despite national, cultural and societal differences," media and global news had "created very similar generational experiences in the nine countries involved" (p. 6).

While the media still has a large influence, the newest platform for establishing a distance community is a result of the growth of the Internet and the prominence of mobile devices that can access the Internet from practically anywhere. Today's generations share common experiences through viewing real-time images and videos of global events through apps and websites (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). The advent of the Internet has also prompted higher education to rethink how to administer learning. According to Quinn, Foote, and Williams (2012), "Educators understand that learning always takes place within communities and culture. All learning takes place on the foundation of one's worldview" (p. 172). Some institutions have faltered in their attempts to enter online education while others have experienced great success. The interesting thing to note is that studies do support the idea that an online environment can facilitate a sense of community among participants located in dispersed areas.

Videos

One of the first opportunities online professors have to address students, foster a sense of community, and begin to spread salt and light is through an initial welcome/meet-the-professor video. As professors share customary items related to their personal and professional background as well as their teaching philosophy, their Christian worldview can be naturally introduced. In addition, the fruits of the Spirit are evident when professors are able to convey an authentic concern for students and display an approachable demeanor. The opening video gives students their initial impression

of the professor and can work to distill student anxiety and promote a sense of community by inviting and encouraging students to share their experiences and thoughts in their assignments and in their online group discussion posts.

Discussion Posts

The more interaction that can be fostered, the greater the sense of community will become. While training professors new to online instruction, the director for digital learning at Evangel University commented,

> If we hope to make an impact on the personal and spiritual development of our students, then we have to be serious about interacting with them. We have to make opportunities to connect with them, preferably with the content of our course front and center. (Fabian, 2017)

A great way to promote interaction through course content is to require students to contribute to discussion posts. Best practices suggest that students should have opportunities to share their unique experiences and discussions give students the opportunity to benefit from both student-to-professor interaction and student-to-student interaction (Quinn et al., 2012).

A second way to incorporate salt and light into an online course is to use well-framed, thought-provoking discussion prompts that challenge students to state and defend their view on a given topic or controversial issue or to post personal reflection. According to Jung (2015) character and spiritual formation are ongoing processes of self-discovery while having honest relationships with others and with God. When professors create thought-provoking discussion prompts and designate the quality, length, and number of peer responses expected, it encourages students to contribute meaningful posts. This not only encourages them to critically think about a topic but also allows them to benefit from the thoughts and responses of others. The process of writing an initial response and then processing and responding to what others have posted invites the self-discovery and honest relationships with others that Jung references.

Written Assignments

Written assignments are a third way professors can intentionally integrate salt and light into an online course. Jung (2015) states, "Faith in God is deepened as we learn and understand more about ourselves and our world" (p. 90). Professors who can create written assignments that address issues of professional formation as well as personal formation prompt students to refine their practitioner thinking and potentially see the relevance of the topic in their own lives. When students analyze, synthesize, and apply academic content with spiritual truths, it promotes character formation that can deeply impact the researcher.

Additionally, good habits of writing and research such as avoiding plagiarism, learning to correctly format according to APA standards, and adhering to copyright laws takes additional time and effort. Doing the right thing versus doing the quick/easy thing requires self-discipline and directly promotes character formation.

> Regarding online assignments, Fabian (2017) stated, Connecting personally with students, especially around their submitted work, has proven to be the key component in my experience. So I try to include assignments that allow for some personal disclosure - goals, struggles, questions, hopes, dreams - and I jump on those opportunities to connect with them personally.

Some students are more open to revealing personal aspects. If and when they do, it is a real privilege to be able to connect and speak into their lives. The following is an example from one of the author's personal online teaching experiences. For an assignment, students in an online management course were asked to write a short essay on positive and negative ways to motivate employees, and to relate it to their own experiences. One particular student who was deeply impacted and really connected with the topic wrote:

> Being completely transparent, I believe this may have been one of my first assignments where I've cried while I wrote. I don't know what it was that got into me, but this assignment definitely brought clarity to issues I didn't know were issues and didn't know how to solve. Thank you for teaching me.

Striving to connect online takes effort and intentionality and can make professors feel vulnerable because it requires true authenticity. However, when a connection is made, when a student begins to trust the professor, and when a student reveals deeper thoughts or asks life questions, professors experience a unique joy that comes from impacting the next generation. Those are the moments that more than make up for the decrease in compensation that comes from choosing to pursue a calling in higher education rather than a career in industry.

Assignment Feedback & Email Exchanges

Most learning management systems provide professors with a variety of feedback options that can increase the personal feel of distance learning. Using options such as embedding written comments within the student's paper, providing audio feedback combined with a screen view of grading the student's paper, or creating video feedback can help students feel more connected and comfortable with the professor. Regardless of the feedback format chosen, professors who provide quality feedback that challenges and encourages the student send the message that they are

engaged, they care, and they desire to help the student further develop. Utilizing unique ways to interact and connect with students while providing feedback through the LMS not only helps to build a connection, but it can also lead students to initiate dialog and open the door for the professor to integrate salt and light in a more personalized response.

Another opportunity to interact with students is through emails. Emails can be to the entire class or to an individual student. Examples of class emails include weekly reminders of work to be completed, announcements that grading is completed and grades can be viewed, or inspiration to keep plugging away on longer-term assignments. Emails can also be sent to encourage individual students who are performing exceptionally well to keep up the good work, or they can reach out to students who are falling behind in submitting assignments or performing below average. Emails have proven very successful for the authors in their attempts to connect. Students enrolled in distance learning usually respond with much thanks when professors show personal concern for them. Sending a simple email can result in students becoming more motivated to submit overdue coursework and sometimes prompts them to initiate a discussion regarding challenging circumstances that opens the door for the professor to spread salt and light.

CONCLUSIONS

Every professor-student interaction, whether it is contributing comments on assigned discussion threads, sending an e-mail, or providing thoughtful feedback on assignments, provides an opportunity to connect with students, show authentic concern, and spread salt and light. When an online professor strives to intentionally integrate spiritual salt and light into their course, the Holy Spirit has the opportunity to work in the students' lives to do anything from melting ice to removing stains and dead particles to allowing them to see themselves and their environment more clearly.

Earlier it was stated that the precursor to spreading salt and light in online courses is to work through an aesthetically developed course site. The article will conclude with a thought from Jung (2015) that is even more foundational: "The ability to be relational, transparent, encouraging, and attentive to the souls of others is a natural outgrowth of inward development" (p. 30). The ability to spread salt and light really starts long before the professor ever accepts the assignment to teach the course. It begins with a spiritually mature professor intentionally striving to be a conduit of the love and grace of Jesus to their students. We can only give away what we possess, and we can only be a conduit

if we are connected to the source. The final quote is an encouragement to all Christian professors to stay connected in their relationship with Jesus. Through that connection, professors can effectively connect with their students, spread salt and light, and produce fruit.

> Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5).

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