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Adventist Education Online

Special Issue

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Janine Monica Lim

A s Adventist educators, we all have a heart and passion for providing access to Christian education to as many students as possible. We see the value of the faith-saturated learning environment where students experience religious values moment by moment. We long to see more students receiving an Adventist education—and often we even sacrifice personally to ensure that students can attend Adventist schools. Hence, online education captures our imagination and interest. Could online education

Adventist Distance Education:

A Bridge to Access

expand access to Adventist education? The contributors to this issue would answer this question with a resounding YES! Here are four essential reasons why:

• **Access that bridges major distances.** Access is a significant reason for providing online, hybrid, and distance-education opportunities in addition to our brick-and-mortar offerings. Online education allows us to extend our reach to remote areas, to areas without Adventist schools. Distance education also provides the opportunity to offer courses and programs that might not be available to students at the Adventist school nearest to them.

• **Access that provides flexibility.** Adult learners, with families and jobs, much prefer to acquire their education online.[1] I think often of our K-12 teachers who have traditionally enrolled at the nearby Adventist college or university to take classes in the summer. They work so hard during the school year that it is often difficult to also study during the summer and give up family time. Online education allows for access from anywhere with a high-speed Internet connection, and this opens up possibilities for meeting the students' needs for flexibility and work/life/school balance.

• **Access on-demand.** Have you noticed that it's much less common than in the past for anyone to watch the news, or television shows, at a specific time? Now viewers can watch the show episodes on-demand through online services. News can be acquired on-demand through online newspapers, YouTube, and videos on Facebook news feeds. Similarly, students want their learning "on-demand." Providing flexible learning opportunities enables us to reach students and families who need more options to fit learning into their busy lives.

• **Access that's affordable.** Sometimes online education is offered via a method that allows for reduction of cost. Students enrolling in online courses often do not have to pay transportation costs, fees for use of campus facilities such as libraries, cafeterias, or residential housing, or other amenities. As it is increasingly challenging for families to pay for Adventist education, online education provides another option. For families preferring to keep their teenagers at home but who have no day academy nearby, online education provides access to Adventist education. For too long we have shunned families who choose public education. But why not, instead, offer families additional choices for Adventist education? We can provide courses and degrees that increase student choices beyond the public or

Administrative Essentials for Online Programs

Delivering programs online, whether at the elementary, secondary, or tertiary level, is a significant undertaking. This practical overview examines several areas administrators should consider as they set up or seek to improve online courses and programs offered by their schools. Several questions are provided to spark thinking, with additional resources referenced for further reading.

Administrators and education stakeholders involved in decision-making should reflect on a number of essential components before making a decision about offering online education: the alignment of online delivery to the school's mission of providing Adventist education; the need to create an online learning-support unit; the design of the program; and the essential student services.

Ensuring That Online Delivery Aligns With Your School's Mission

Diving into offering online courses and programs should be more than embracing a new fad; it should be a well-planned experience that tightly aligns with the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist school.[1] Questions to consider include the following: Does online delivery match the institution's strategic plans and goals? Does it fit into the institution's technology plan?[2] The decision to offer online courses or programs should not be seen as a way to increase revenue quickly.

Administrators must ensure that their planning to deliver education online includes strategies to overcome resistance to change with listening, patience, and tolerance.[3] They should review the school's culture and processes to ensure that the learning environment is ready for online education. For example, collecting and analyzing institutional data, conducting needs assessments, conducting survey research or forming focus groups to gather information, and assessing organizational processes are all strategies for evaluating what is taking place on campus and how the environment might respond to change.[4]

Staffing an Online Support Department

To plan for success, create a centralized unit responsible for supporting distance education.[5] This unit should interact and work with the rest of the institution rather than function as an independent silo. Consider whether to outsource support for online education or develop the talent already present in the school.[6] Areas to consider when developing resources include staffing, training for teachers new to online teaching, tech-

BY JANINE MONICA LIM

nology support, instructional design support, marketing, and student services. Find or develop staff with training in the delivery of online and distance education.[7] Teachers will need support, clear expectations, and bite-sized training as they develop and teach online courses.[8] (See the article by La Ronda Forsey on page 11 in this issue for more detail on supporting teachers.)

Set realistic expectations for the amount of work and the time involved in creating, writing, and developing an online course, as well as teaching online. For example, will there be policies that clearly define who legally owns online course content developed by teachers (whether the teacher or the school)? Who can update the material? How often? How will contract or adjunct teachers be trained or brought on board? Who will regulate student-teacher ratios, and how will this be done?

How will teachers and students be supported? What is the plan for hiring and funding support staff, in ad-

dition to technology support? Some schools assign one or more persons to support both teachers and students. For example, Montemorelos University (Mexico) has a UMVirtual faculty-and-student-support person. (See the article by Lorena Neria de Girarte in the April-June 2018 issue.) Other schools have chosen to have a separate student-services director and faculty-support department, the current arrangement at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A).

Another approach is to embed tutoring in the library services for online students, as Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A.) currently does. At the K-12 level, one way to organize support is by the grade level of students served, as Griggs International Academy at Andrews University has done. Whatever the approach, it should focus on the overall delivery of instruction, not just the online courses.

Designing Online Programs

Online programs require planning and support. Areas to consider include need, intended audience, technology tools, outcomes, course sequencing, finances, attendance and participation requirements, and the school-to-community experience. Hiring qualified teachers and monitoring and evaluating their performance is also a critical part of the planning process. (See La Ronda Forsey's article on page 11 in this issue for more on this topic.)

• **Need.** First, consider the need for the program. Online students at the university level tend to be adult learners who don't want to uproot their families to travel to the school. Online students at the K-12 level may have unique needs or values that can best be met by the flexibility of online learning. In addition, students at all levels may use online courses to deal with gaps and scheduling challenges in their on-campus learning plan.

Spend some time researching the

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potential audience for an online program and explore how best to address their needs. What are the needs? What types of students are likely to enroll in the degree program? How does the proposed program—and tuition—compare to what its competitors offer? Can the intended audience afford the planned tuition costs? Is there a market that needs this program, or is the market already saturated? For example, because many online MBAs are available, this has created a market saturation in the United States. For this reason, it would not be wise to start a new online MBA. Research thoughtfully the need and market for the envisioned program. Online resources or university researchers can provide assistance as you consider how to conduct a needs assessment and survey the market for your program.[9]

• **Intended Audience**. Understanding the intended audience will help inform essential characteristics of the program design and delivery options. Do potential students all live in the same time zone or nearby time zones? What level of flexibility will students want from their online program? Will required synchronous (live) sessions be a benefit or a barrier to the intended audience? Do the members of the potential audience already attend a brick-and-mortar school and desire online offerings only to supplement their education? Or are they homeschooled children; traveling, working adults; or another population that is best reached with an online delivery?

What computer and motivational skills will students need? Will synchronous delivery be the best option for them?[10] Will local centers be used to support the distance learning, with students coming together for project-based learning, proctored testing, and other types of face-to-face educational experiences?[11] As you identify an online program's po-

tential audience and learn as much as you can about them, you will be able to design an attractive package that meets their learning needs.

• **Technology Tools.** Online education relies heavily on technology tools, both computer hardware and software. From server capabilities to database and networking systems, resources need to be readily available *in advance* to sustain an online program. Mandatory technology includes a learning-management system, a method for storing and streaming video, and a tool for videoconferencing live, synchronous class meetings.

In addition, a school may desire to provide collaborative work tools such as Google Apps, and an e-mail address for each student. Tools should be selected carefully. Use already-existing technology within the institution or school as much as possible. Consider the audience, their daily schedules, time zones, and Internet access.[12] Establish a technology committee that includes educators and technology experts, and assign them to create a technology plan and to provide oversight for the selection, implementation, support, and maintenance of the technology tools.[13]

• **Defining and Assessing Outcomes**. *Student learning outcomes* are the knowledge, skills, or behaviors that students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of the program. Program outcomes should be established and carefully defined as part of the curriculum planning and design process. What should students be able to do when they complete the program?[14] How will these outcomes be measured? What skills are desired by the employers of students who graduate from this program? What types of learning experiences and practicums are necessary to help students progress to the next grade level or to degree completion? What kinds of academic weaknesses will require remediation in adult students enrolling in online courses after

many years outside the classroom? (Common areas that need addressing include academic writing and computer skills.[15])

• **Course Sequencing**. Curriculum design staff at the school, or at a nearby university, may be able to provide assistance or training in designing the curriculum and sequence of the courses. Course sequencing should be considered after courses are designed and learning experiences planned to meet the intended outcomes.

Questions to think about at this stage include the following: What plans are in place to help students facing a major life event or setback? How will this type of problem affect their ability to follow the established sequence of courses? Will such students be able to join another cohort? How much time will they be allowed after the event to complete this transition, and who will assist them? Are there established, stated policies to guide this transition?

Benchmark your program with similar programs at other schools. This type of research can provide guidance as you create the policies and procedures for your program.

• **Finances**. Online programs are often erroneously seen as cash-generating enterprises. Experts disagree on whether online programs cost just as much as face-to-face programs or whether they should typically cost less. See https://www.onlinepro gramhowto.org/budget/ for a more detailed analysis. Adventist schools should focus on the mission of Christian education, aiming to provide access to church-sponsored schooling to a greater number of students. Plans for online education should include careful thought about the audience and mission. (See "Intended Audience" earlier in this article.) The careful thought and planning that goes into the program should include an investigation of

K-12 Guide to Online Learning by International Association for K-12 Online Learning (INACOL): https://www.onlineprogramhowto.org/.

This resource provides detailed information about getting started with online learning and addresses steps such as funding, policies, budgeting and staffing, administrative system (LMS and CMS), curriculum, teachers, students, and quality control.

OLC Quality Scorecard Suite: https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-suite/.

The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) provides a comprehensive Quality Scorecard Suite that helps institutions identify and establish quality criteria and benchmarking tools and ensure excellence in online learning programs. The site provides free access to OLC quality scorecards for the administration of online programs and handbooks for member institutions for a fee: https://onlinelearning consortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-administration-online-programs/ and http://info2.onlinelearningconsortium.org/rs/897-CSM-305/images/Quality% 20Scorecard%20%20Scorecard%20%286%20page%20version%29.pdf.

University of Minnesota's Center for Educational Innovation: https:// cei.umn.edu/online-learning/develop-and-administer-online-program.

This Website gives step-by-step assistance for developing and administering online programs, such as conducting a needs assessment, securing academic approval, understanding instructional design, maintaining academic integrity, protecting intellectual property, conducting program evaluations, etc.

University of Missouri: http://online.missouri.edu/faculty-staff/course-development.aspx.

This Website offers resources that will help online program administrators get started. Program concepts, potential types of curriculum design and course delivery formats, and development of an infrastructure to support students who will be enrolled in the program are some of the topics discussed. Also included is a link to the University of Missouri's Online Operations Guide: http:// online.missouri.edu/pdf/MizzouOnline-Operations-Guide-AY15.pdf, which provides a good example of operation allocations and costs.

Academic Article: Rebecca Hoey et al., "Evaluating the Impact of the Administrator and Administrative Structure of Online Programs at Nonprofit Private Colleges," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 17:3 (Fall 2014): https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall173/hoey_mccracken_ gehrett_snoeyink173.html.

The authors report the impact of administrators and administrative structures on outcomes of online student enrollment, number of programs, and efficiency of operations for nonprofit schools affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), as well as how these factors compare with public colleges. It is a must read for beginning administrators of online programs seeking to understand the dynamics of program planning.

the potential source(s) of funding, operational costs, and projected income. What is the funding source for this start-up investment? How many students will be needed to ensure that the program is financially viable enough to continue into the future? How many staff members? Will the program utilize adjunct faculty only,

or also use full-time teachers already employed by the institution? Will full-time faculty have their teaching loads adjusted to accommodate the demands of preparing for and teaching in an online program? Who will determine pay scales? The resources

in the sidebar provide additional information on planning how to finance the online program.

• **In-person Attendance**. Will students be required to come to the school for any part of the school year (K-12) or degree program? For example, the school might have an orientation at the beginning or a capstone experience at the end. Some courses might include a face-to-face attendance requirement, others might be completely asynchronous.

Above all, consider the intended audience and its needs, as well as the instructional needs. Are there some presentations that absolutely must be delivered in person? Will the intended audience be able to travel to school, given their schedules, other responsibilities, and finances? Where will they stay during the times when they are required to be on campus? K-12 students (minors) will need to be accompanied by parents and chaperones, so accommodations for these groups should be considered as well. Consider all perspectives during this stage of the planning process.

• **School Community Experience**. Learning takes place in community, and the online education experience, like traditional education, requires community. Christian schools are communities of faith comprised of worship experiences, guest speakers, forums, weekend programs, visits to faculty homes, and more.[16] These experiences contribute to the distinct character of the school and enhance students' feelings of belonging and connection. What similar experiences will the program offer within and outside courses? Will the courses be designed and structured to include student support or study groups?

Does the institution offer town-hall meetings, seminars, symposia, or other events for students who are currently enrolled in the school or degree program? If so, how can similar experiences be provided online?

How will online students gain ac-

cess to institutional information, such as the bulletin, weekly news, social media, YouTube content, staff and student directories, streaming of church services, podcasts, the college radio station, etc.? Who will be assigned to invite online students to attend streamed events? What provisions will be made for students' social and spiritual networking with one another? Be intentional about setting up a learning community for online and face-to-face students to interact.[17]

Online Education Policies

Every school has policies that guide practice. Review current policies, adapting as needed, and create additional policies for online education. Areas to consider include philosophical, academic, governance, human resources, legal, technical, and fiscal policies.[18] Define methods for ensuring compliance with the regulations and rules for operating online in each of the countries where students are being served. Ensure that the school has permission to operate in the states and countries where online education is being offered. Decide how to handle academic control and oversight, particularly at the higher education level. Will online delivery be embedded with face-to-face instruction? A completely separate entity? Or somewhere in between? Ensure that structures for assessment and program review are in place for online as well as face-to-face programs. Create a committee to oversee online initiatives with faculty, library, student services, and support staff participation and representation (see, for example: http://online.aiias.edu/about/dol-staff).

Online advisors are typically students' main contact with the institution. Advisors offer support throughout the whole learning experience, and often provide a bridge between distance students and processes created for on-campus students that may be challenging for the online student.

Providing Student Services

Use a systems approach to create and set up student support services: advising, peer network, listing of courses, bookstore, library, technology, and alumni services.[19] A systems approach considers all the components and how they interrelate with one another.[20] Sometimes these services and components are referred to as the "wraparound" to the online courses. They impact the quality of the program and student experience and should be planned carefully.

• **Admissions**. Will new students be accepted once a year, each semester, or more often? The big for-profit institutions have set a high competitive standard with fast admissions processes (within two weeks or less) and many starting points throughout the year so students can start soon after they select the degree they wish to pursue. Who will assist online students with navigating the registration process? How will the admissions office ensure a fast response time for prospective students?

• **Orientation**. How will the school provide online students with an orientation to the university, the department, the degree, and the online environment? Will the orientation take place face-to-face, online, in a synchronous live session, or via a mini-course embedded in the learning-management system (LMS)? While the age and capability of the students will determine how this is done, the following should be part of every student's orientation experience: friendly welcome messages that set the tone for the school online experience; prayer with and for the students as they start their academic journey; introduction of all the people with whom the students will interact, including library support, the program director, faculty for at least the first course, LMS support, etc.; introductions by students; an overview of the program, including outcomes, specific learning experiences, unique experiences, etc.; and a video demo of an online course in the program so students know what to expect and how to interact with their teachers.

• **Advising**. Online advisors are typically students' main contact with the institution. Advisors offer support throughout the whole learning experience, and often provide a bridge between distance students and processes created for on-campus students that may be challenging for the online student.[21] Plan to address the following areas: Who will provide advising for online students? Are these individuals prepared to do videoconferencing and respond quickly to students' questions? Are they trained in the unique needs and perspectives of online students, whether K-12 students or young adults and adults at the college and university level? Who will send regular updates with encouragement and reminders about the next steps in the students' academic journey?

• **Library**. Are the internal processes set up so that online students can access the school's library services? How will online students be trained to access and use library resources? Will one or more library staff members be trained and provided with tools to communicate effectively with online students?

• **Academic Support (Disability Accommodations, Counseling Services, and Student Success).** How will online students obtain the services to which other students at your school are entitled? What disability accommodations will be available? Is the counseling and testing office ready to support online students? What tutoring services are available or should be made available to online students? Will students be able to access on-campus student success centers such as the writing center, math center, or study skills lab? Are these offices set up to assist online students? Who will refer students for these services?

• **Technology Support**. Some questions to consider include the following: What range of services will the school provide? Which office will provide tech support for online students? For example, will the school support just the LMS and videoconferencing tools? What if students have issues with their personal computers? Will online students be entitled to discounts on academic software and printed materials? What hours will the help desk be open for students and teachers?

• **Proctoring; Deterring Academic Dishonesty**. How will the identity of online students be verified? How will the integrity of the assessment processes be maintained? One of the concerns regarding the quality of online education is this question: How does the institution know that the person doing the work is the student receiving the credit? This important question should be addressed to ensure a quality assessment experience. Using a proctor allows the school to compare the ID of the student to the person who completes an important assessment necessary to pass the course. Some schools proctor exams through a videoconference, while others require students to meet with an approved proctor, and some even require on-campus proctoring.[22]

Online programs also need to identify and implement effective ways of deterring academic dishonesty in daily assignments and research/term papers. Strategies can include clearly stating what constitutes academic dishonesty (what it looks like) and including this in the handbook for online students; establishing policies for reporting academic dishonesty, as well as policies for disciplinary actions; arming teachers with strategies to help deter students from submitting the work of someone else as their own; and investing in software tools that can help detect plagiarism.[23]

• **Automated E-mails and Learning Analytics**. Will automatic e-mails be set up for students to ensure that they receive reminders and essential information at key points in the academic journey? What about creating other alerts and notifications triggered by data analytics in the LMS or student-information system to alert staff to guide and redirect students to the next steps to success?

• **Complaints**. How will student complaints be received and processed? Who will ensure that students' concerns are addressed in a timely manner?

• **Marketing.** Identify the specific market target. It should be a sufficiently large market to sustain the program and enable it to grow. Research and review how that audience prefers to receive advertising—via e-mail, Facebook, text messaging, or printed flyers? What online communities or listservs might help you reach the audience? Who is available in the institution to assist in marketing the online degree or program?

Implementing a high-quality administrative support system for online learning, elementary through higher education, takes thoughtful planning and careful, strategic work. Administrators and education stakeholders must do the groundwork to ensure the delivery of a quality Adventist online education. The best-practices principles discussed within this article will help ensure that programs align with the school's mission, that programs have the necessary online learning-support systems in place for faculty and students, and that the programs are designed to meet specific market needs.

With careful planning, an effective system can be created. ✏

This article has been peer reviewed.

Janine Monica Lim, PhD, *is the Associate Dean for Online Higher Education in the School of Distance Education and Associate Professor of Educational Technology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. In her current role, Dr. Lim is responsible for more than 200 online courses, faculty training, and systems that support online learning. She oversees the faculty and courses of the Consortium of Adventist Colleges and Universities, and since 2015 has served on the board of the United States Distance Learning Association. Prior to her tenure at Andrews University, Dr. Lim coordinated distance education for 22 K-12 school districts in southwest Michigan, initiated international videoconferencing projects such as Read Around the Planet and Mystery-Quest, co-founded TWICE (Michigan's K-12 Videoconferencing Organization), taught graduate courses in educational technology, and published and presented in her field. She*

also authored a column on technology for the JOURNAL.

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How to Successfully Support Online Teachers

Twenty years ago, finding Adventist teachers with online teaching experience was very difficult. The online school administrator had to grapple with the balance of hiring an experienced teacher with little technology experience, or a recent graduate who was a digital native[1] but had limited teaching experience. Fortunately, since that time, many Adventist educators have realized that technology and online education are a valuable support to our educational system. They have become involved in the instruction or facilitating of online education for individuals or entire classrooms. Online classes provide Adventist education with the ability to truly reach all students.

Adventist correspondence education began as early as 1909 through The Fireside Correspondence School, which eventually grew into Home Study International, and most recently, Griggs University/Griggs International Academy.[2] In the 1990s, K-12 Adventist online learning began with AE21 (using synchronous learning) and Griggs International Academy (using asynchronous learning). A number of our universities now offer online courses and degrees. After almost 25 years of experience in online learning within Adventist education, it is becoming more common to find teachers with online teaching experience. Yet, even qualified candidates continue to need training, profes-

sional development, and additional support as new technology tools and approaches to online instruction are developed.

Online education requires administrators who will provide support and mentoring to teachers—who are the school's direct, daily connection with students.[3] Administrators can accomplish this by building into the structure of the program opportunities for support, which can be offered by experienced instructors or program supervisors. Because teachers of online courses often live in rural areas lacking fast Internet connections, they may need help using innovative teaching strategies to connect effectively with students online. Communicating with online teachers, wherever they are located, must be a top priority for the administrator, to ensure that they do not feel isolated and that they understand and embrace the goals of the school. This article shares seven practical guidelines that will help online school administrators choose and support their online teachers.

1. Hire Qualified Teachers

Once a job is posted and the résumés start filling the inbox, the program administrator must carefully evaluate which candidates will make good online teachers.[4] At the K-12 level, limiting the selection to certified teachers is the first

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step in sorting the résumés (see Box 1). At all levels, administrators should ascertain that teachers are qualified in their specific content area, verify their academic qualifications, and request references.

Because only a few applicants will have online teaching experience, the administrator can arrange for a videoconference interview to assess the candidate's technological and communication skills. The online interview and references will provide valuable data to use in evaluating the candidate's aptitude for online teaching. Since many online teaching jobs are part-time contract positions, the program administrator also needs to determine whether the candidate is willing to commit enough hours to handle the responsibilities of the job. If the classes are asynchronous, the schedule will be more flexible, but the teacher will need to devote adequate time to video conference interaction and providing prompt assistance to students' questions. Before the interview, candidates should be provided with a teacher handbook so they know what will be expected of them. Policies that guide the hiring of individuals who may live outside of a state or country should already be in place. If not, then these need to be developed, and it would be appropriate to consult with the institution's legal counsel to craft policies regarding benefits, applicable tax requirements, or other contractual issues. Finally, before teachers receive an employment contract, the school must conduct a background check[5] on each one.

2. Provide an Orientation

A vital aspect of hiring and keeping qualified teachers is ensuring that they receive significant support and training. Since Learning Management Systems (LMS) are complex and different from one another—and teaching online is quite different

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Box 1. Applications Specific to K-12 Online Education.

The practical guidelines shared in this article are applicable to all levels. However, there are specific guidelines that are critical for the K-12 environment.

• Teachers must be certified and endorsed in the subject areas they wish to teach.

• Background checks are recommended for individuals working with minors in the United States, but each state has its own requirements. For example, some states require child abuse checks, federal criminal checks, and state criminal background checks. The same is recommended for adults working for church-affiliated institutions. The NAD works with Verified Volunteers to provide assistance with this process. In addition, Adventist Risk Management provides several resources to support church-affiliated institutions. See https://adventistrisk.org/en-US/Safety-Resources/Solutions-Newsletter/How-to-Recognize-and-Prevent-Child-Abuse. Since each country has its own requirements for background checks, make sure to investigate these as part of the pre-hiring process.

• Parents and chaperones accompanying prospective and new students to orientation events will need housing accommodations.

• Administrators and teachers will need to ensure that communication occurs regularly between the school and the parent.

• The North American Division (NAD) has created several resources for K-12 distance-education schools. See TDEC at http://tdec.nadeducation.org/distance-education/ for a compilation of materials such as the philosophy and rationale supporting distance education, accrediting organizations, approved schools offering online and distance education in the NAD, and forms and checklists that are required to be used in the NAD when seeking approval to begin offering distance education. Other divisions might find these forms useful as guidelines.

• Benjamin Herold, "Online Classes for K-12 Students: 10 Research Reports You Need to Know," *Education Week: Digital Education* (June 21, 2017): http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Digital Education/2017/06/online_classes_k12_research_need_to_know.html.

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from classroom teaching— online teachers will need training, support, and regular communication from the administrator. Administrators must make multiple commitments: to help teachers through the period of transitioning to online instruction if it is a new experience; to assist them in learning a new LMS if they previously taught in a different one; and to helping them enhance their skills. An orientation, initial technical training, and close monitoring during the first few weeks of the teacher's work set the stage for success.

Orientation for an online teacher should consist of a series of meetings and training sessions. During these sessions, the administrator, with help from the administrative team, can provide teachers with the teacher handbook; introduce the required curriculum guides and frameworks (or for higher education, the course syllabus); and introduce the LMS designated for the program.

Even though the teacher handbook might include guidelines for using the LMS, the real learning takes place when the teacher works one-on-one with the administrative team to learn the intricacies of the LMS system such as the various options for giving feedback to students, the types of assignments that can be posted, video formats, and features that provide the required support for students. After the teacher has been issued a username and password for the LMS, the training becomes more relevant since he or she has access to the assigned courses and students. It's often helpful to have a new teacher consult with the previous teacher to review the course and talk about specific aspects of the curriculum. The best scenario is for a new teacher to obtain support from the course design team, the administrator, and another teacher. If the teacher lives some distance from headquarters, orientation can be done via video conferencing. It is important that teachers have multiple contact options to get the help they

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need. Support and appreciation from the administrative team contribute to a teacher's ability to successfully provide students with quality educational support.

3. Planned Teacher Meetings

Planning teacher meetings can be a challenge in an online school or program. Since teachers are often some distance from headquarters and mostly working from home, an online program might conceivably have hired teachers who live in a variety of time zones. Also, many instructors only teach a single online class, and possibly teach in a local brick-and-mortar school during the day. Having at least four meetings a year with the entire group of online teachers is recommended. This allows for announcements, questions, and time for professional development that is specific to online teachers. Recording these meetings is a good option, in case a few teachers cannot make the appointment. Meetings should not be limited to these four times, but administrators might have to deliver the meeting in different ways to ensure that it reaches everyone. Suggestions include making a brief video presentation with announcements and updates. A group e-mail can also ensure that information reaches everyone quickly. Some of the most productive meetings take place when a small group of teachers assembles to give input or help make decisions about specific tasks. An example of this might be if all the math teachers are asked to meet to discuss the best way to handle tutoring for a student if the assigned teacher is on vacation or becomes ill. Administrators must ensure that policies and contingency plans are in place for such emergencies, including but not limited to an online teacher quitting mid-term, being fired, or not being able to fulfill the contractual agreement for any reason. Meetings enable teachers to have input and help

ensure their "buy-in" to the mission and processes of the organization.

4. Communicate Regularly

There is rarely enough communication between administrators and teachers, even though it is the key to a successful school environment. This is true for any school, but especially for an online program. Online teachers should know the "big picture" of what is happening at the school in order to fill their roles effectively. Teachers need to receive announcements, newsletters, handbooks, etc.

Social media is also a good way to keep in touch with teachers. Creating a private Facebook page for teachers to join adds another avenue of building community with people living in all parts of the country. A school administrator or member of the program administrative team can be assigned to moderate and monitor the questions and comments posted on this page on an ongoing basis.

It is easy to assume that the teachers know what is happening in the organization and understand all the policies and procedures, but this is not always the case. The administrator can create a culture of two-way communication by making sure the teachers feel comfortable texting or calling at any time. In an online program, it is possible that an administrator and a teacher can work together for several years without ever meeting each other. This makes video conferencing invaluable to building relationships—in fact, it is really the most important form of communication used by administrators, teachers, and students in an online school or program.

The next most important communication method is texting because it is fast and efficient. Administrators should keep track of conversations and know what is most effective for individual teachers to ensure a healthy working relationship through real-time interaction.

New teachers will have very different training needs than veteran teachers, but administrators should conduct an annual orientation for all teachers to cover policy changes as well as technology updates and reminders. It is very easy for an online teacher working from home to start feeling isolated or discon-

For asynchronous online education, two aspects relate to teacher evaluation. The first is ensuring that each teacher keeps up with the work load and provides effective and timely feedback to students. In asynchronous online courses that are prepared ahead of time, feedback is the most important aspect of teaching. The administrator should regularly evaluate the teachers' work by reviewing the LMS log.

nected from the organization. Teachers need to be contacted on a variety of occasions, not just after a parent or student has complained. Giving teachers feedback from students and parents is important, but this should not be the only time a teacher hears from administrators.

Teachers also need reminders of best practices for using technology to give student feedback and enhance the course. For example, administrators can recommend that teachers provide students with feedback using the audio or video option, not just written feedback.

5. Conduct Evaluations (Weekly and Annually)

For asynchronous online education, two aspects relate to teacher evaluation. The first is ensuring that each teacher keeps up with the work load and provides effective and timely feedback to students. In asynchronous online courses that are prepared ahead of time, feedback is the most important aspect of teaching. The administrator should regularly evaluate the teachers' work by reviewing the LMS log.

Providing feedback within a reasonable time (no more than two days) enables students to learn more efficiently and keep moving in their course. Systematically monitoring the frequency and quality of the feedback given to students is one way of assessing the teacher's effectiveness, and this should be done at least weekly. Teachers who regularly get behind in their grading and in providing feedback to students will need to be counseled and warned, and perhaps have their teaching load rearranged or reduced.

The second aspect of evaluating online teachers is assessing the actual "teacher-student interaction" that takes place. Does the teacher give helpful, personalized feedback to each student? Do the students receive help or tutoring in a timely manner? Does the teacher grade fairly and consistently? Most of this can be verified via the LMS, but "end-of-course" student surveys are also helpful in determining this information. Annual teacher evaluations should also be conducted. In many cases, the teacher completes a provided self-evaluation questionnaire, and then the administrator reviews the questionnaire in a video conference meeting with each teacher. This can be a learning experience for both the teacher and the administrator.[6]

6. Listen to Teacher Input

As a teacher works with students, he or she will recognize what works well in a course. Qualified teachers have been hired for their expertise, so it is important that administrators listen to what they have to say about a course or about how students perceive the curriculum. In an online program, the teachers have the most direct communication with students, so they are aware of issues that might not be communicated directly to administration. It is helpful to have a form for teachers to submit if they perceive the need for a change in the content or design of a course.

In other areas, such as philosophical issues and student complaints, the teacher should share these concerns with administrators as soon as possible. Performance evaluations should be a time when administrators listen to the teachers' ideas about how to make program improvements. For example, if a teacher is struggling to implement a particular activity for students, the administrator can engage the teacher in helping to find a solution. Teachers are often good problem solvers, making them built-in consultants as administrators attempt to improve the system.

7. Promote Teacher/Student Interaction

The administrator sets the tone for how teachers interact with students. In reality, the best way to create an interactive culture is for the administrator to teach at least one online course per year that gives him or her direct, daily experience with how the system works and the options for interaction. If the administrator has direct experience with the LMS and a course, he or she will find it easier to communicate ideas and innovation to the teachers and to troubleshoot problems.

All teachers need encouragement to do their best—especially in the area of teacher/student interaction. For example, an administrator who experiments with the discussion board can report his or her successful interactions and give suggestions on how to use it for other courses. Helping teachers find tools and resources that will enable them to successfully meet students' needs is a key way to support student/teacher interaction. For example, if a teacher needs to meet with online students by appointment, the administrator can help the teacher find a digital appointment book that eliminates the need for e-mailing back and forth to find a suitable time to meet. The administrator can also facilitate discussion among teachers about how to best interact with students in providing feedback, instruction, and general support.

Conclusion

Being an online program administrator has unique challenges and rewards. It is vital to understand the significance of having a good working relationship with teachers, as well as the need to provide them with the tools and support to effectively guide students through their courses. Taking a hands-on approach with teaching, and leading by example are the best ways for an administrator to build a team of great teachers. Adventist education reaches a wide group of students, and online education can fill the gaps that might be difficult for the "brick and mortar" school. Having dedicated, well-trained Seventh-day Adventist teachers and administrators involved in online learning will help the church to serve more students with quality Christian education. ✎

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La Ronda Forsey, MSc, *is Associate Dean of the School of Distance Education and International Partnerships at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A., and also serves as the Principal for Griggs International Academy, a homeschool and distance-education provider for K-12 students. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee; and a Master of Science in Educational Administration from the University of Scranton in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Forsey has spent more than 30 years in teaching and educational administration.*

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Faith Presence: Creating Online Environments That Nurture Faith

The integration of faith with learning is central to Christian education.[1] In the online learning environment, successful implementation of this principle can pose a great challenge to educators. The geographic distance that separates teachers and students makes relationships less personal and hence more difficult to cultivate. Creating an online environment that nurtures faith depends on good relationships between teachers and students. As students gain more control of their own learning, they still need teachers to provide support and advice. As a result, teachers take on the role of "guide on the side," providing help when necessary, but ultimately allowing students to discover on their own. While this type of relationship works well within the online environment as students learn independently, more intentionality is needed to nurture a strong faith presence in the online classroom so class designers must plan how to include learning experiences that support faith integration within each course.

Many teachers of online courses, in an attempt to create Christian learning environments, use the same integration of faith and learning (IFL) strategies commonly found in face-to-face classroom settings, such as beginning classes with devotionals, including Bible texts in lecture outlines and notes, and sharing spiritual beliefs with students in online discussions. Others go a step further and develop creative online chapels. Yet, even with these approaches, many online teachers wonder about the impact of their efforts on students. They ask questions such as these:

• How can I be sure that my students prayed before they began the course module?

• Did my students read the opening prayer or devotional message and meditate on the Bible text I posted?

• Did the students observe, understand, and experience principles of Adventist education in my course?

• Will they be inspired to live a Christian life after exploring the lesson content?

• Were they inspired to engage in mission as a result of my class?

• In short, did they experience faith in their online class?

Given the unique nature of online learning, there is indeed uncertainty regarding the impact of faith integration attempts in this

BY LENI T. CASIMIRO

modality. Using traditional IFL strategies does not guarantee attaining faith presence in an online class. Specific adaptations are needed to achieve this goal in the electronic setting.

Faith Presence Defined

Faith presence, as a construct, was first conceived as an enhancement of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) approach[2] to online education to enable CoI to address the faith integration needs of Christian education. The CoI model emerged out of a framework developed by D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer during a 1997-2001 Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities research project that studied the characteristics and qualities of learning with computer conferencing. Since that time, more than 2,500 publications, dissertations, research projects, and citations have solidified the framework as a model for the types of learning that take place in an online environment. The model posits that an educational experience consists of three key elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.[3] The CoI model was adapted to include faith presence, and renamed the Integrated Community of Inquiry (ICoI) model.[4] The ICoI model serves as the framework for online course design and planning at the Adventist Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

Cognitive presence is the engagement of learners in higher-order thinking and learning. *Social presence* is the creation of a learning community that fosters relationship and interaction among its members. *Teaching presence* is the "design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes."[5]

Faith presence, on the other hand, goes beyond mere alignment in terminology with the other three types of presence. It shares the model's foundational belief that quality online learning happens within a critical community of learners where both personal meaning-making and social interaction are facilitated in the educational transaction.

The CoI model describes a quality educational experience in an environment where the computer is used as a conferencing tool as the "dynamic integration of content and context created and facilitated by a discipline expert and pedagogically competent teacher."[6] Similarly, creating faith presence calls for the same level of personal engagement and meaning-making, even as we respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in creating a dynamic, nurturing community for learners.

In Christian education, the concept of community, the connection of content and context, and the important role of the teacher are, likewise, emphasized, but from the perspective and belief that God designed human beings to be "relational, communicative, cultural, moral, expressive, meaning-makers such that to deprive them of a relationship is to de-humanize" them.[7] The biblical foundation of this belief comes from Genesis 2:18 (NKJV),[8] which says, "It is not good that man should be alone" and the apostle Paul's description of the early Christian believers as the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27) in referring to the interrelationship among them.

Christians believe that the relational nature of humanity was marred when Adam and Eve sinned, leading to "alienation, fragmenta-

Figure 1. Integrated Community of Inquiry Model.
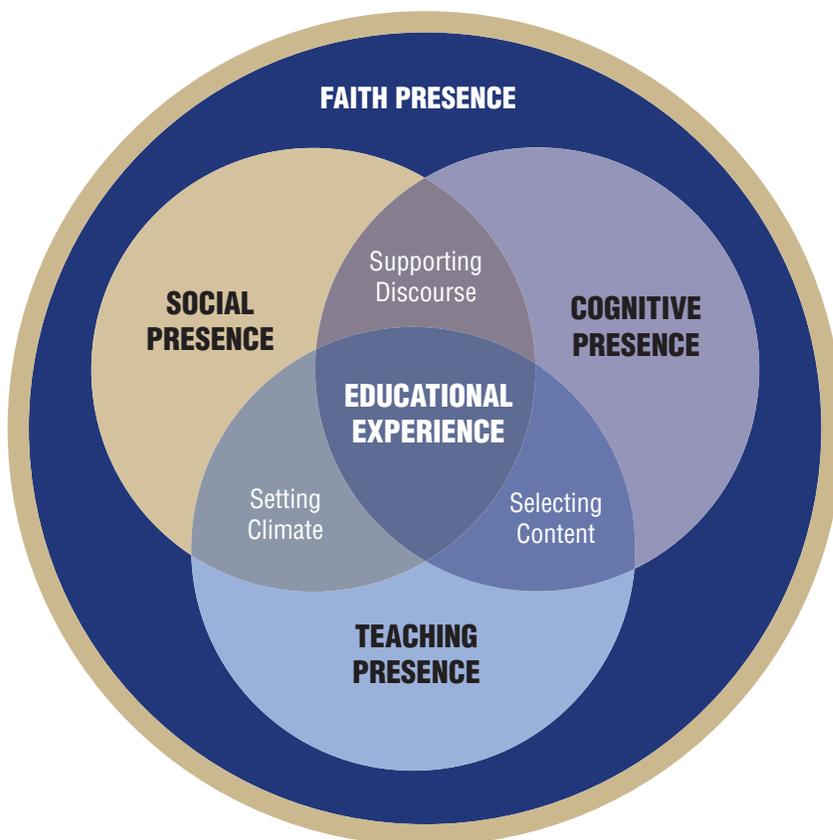
tion, a sense of 'homelessness' and the decline of community."[9] The goal of education is, therefore, "To restore in men and women the image of their Maker."[10] In other words, the goal of education is "to restore connectedness and wholeness."[11]

In the context of the ICoI framework, faith presence is the exercise of faith within a community of learners as a result of "true integration" in an online environment. Faith presence goes beyond an implementation of IFL methods or strategies; it is, instead, the outcome of true integration. Taylor describes true integration as an approach that applies "a unified Christian perspective" to learning: "It is where faith and learning meet and merge. Whenever learning takes place, faith is being exercised in an endeavor to see the fullness of life from God's perspective."[12]

Indicators of Faith Presence

The existence of faith presence in an online class cannot be readily observed by just looking at the course Webpages, considering all the challenges to online education cited earlier. To fully understand how faith is nurtured in this modality requires input from actual participants. Twenty-one students in three fully online graduate-level classes in an Adventist higher education institution were asked, through in-depth structured interviews, to describe their experiences in terms of faith presence in their classes. The interviewers sought to discover the indicators of faith presence as experienced firsthand by the students. Since the students were located in 13 countries around the world, the interviews were conducted through e-mail. The use of open-ended questions enabled the students to openly share their experiences.

Out of the 17 students who responded to the interviews, all of whom were Christians, 16 said

Approaching class lessons from an Adventist *worldview* was cited by 8 of the 16 students to have had the greatest impact on their spiritual lives. One student said, *The atmosphere shows a real spiritual effect. Even the course material is screened and suitable to uplift God yet showing real scientific evidence.*

that their online classes had made an impact in their spiritual lives. Themes emerged from their responses, which were then categorized to find the indicators of faith presence. The students' answers revealed the following as indicators of faith presence, in descending order, with the first being the most-frequently expressed indicator and the last being the least-experienced:

1. worldview,
2. worship,
3. community,
4. lifestyle, and
5. discipleship.

Approaching class lessons from an Adventist *worldview* was cited by 8 of the 16 students to have had the greatest impact on their spiritual lives. One student said, *The atmosphere shows a real spiritual effect. Even the course material is screened and suitable to uplift God yet showing real scientific evidence*

(Interviewee No. 2). Another one said, *I appreciate that we are being encouraged to stand firm on the fundamental principles of the Seventh-day Adventist Church especially as it relates* [sic] *to research. Dr.* [Professor's Name] *in particular is a man of principle and makes it clear that we must stand by Adventist methods of interpretation* (Interviewee No. 8).

The next indicator that emerged from 7 of the 16 responses was *worship*. This refers to the God-focused activity of the class such as devotionals, online chapel, and online week of prayer. One student said, *I really appreciated the devotionals for our Hebrew class. Getting deeper into the meaning of the language and the spiritual significance found therein was refreshing for me* (Interviewee No. 8). In addition, several students shared their testimonies on the value of the online week of prayer.

Both community and discipleship emerged in third place as each was cited by four students. *Community* refers to the bonding by class members. Citing the impact of online relationships, one student said, *I think they are very effective[;] even non-Christians meet a lot and learn about Jesus. I have friends whom I still interact with on other private platforms whom I met online during classes. These friends share a lot of encouragement and strengthening my faith in God and we share a lot when we chat* (Interviewee No. 2).

Discipleship is created when the class provides students with an opportunity to engage in outreach and other ministries of the church. One student testified, *I feel encouraged more and strengthen* [sic] *my faith in God each day with a desire to be in God's service to spread the good news* (Interviewee No. 17). Others mentioned specific research papers or class projects that

opened their eyes to how they could better serve God in the mission field (Interviewees Nos. 4 and 7). (The term *mission* is used in this article to refer to students' reported activities such as outreach, volunteer service, and other church-related ministries.)

Lifestyle was the fifth indicator of faith presence in the students' responses. *Lifestyle* refers to experiences that call for the students to practice Christian values and their willingness to express their faith. An example of a response for this indicator was *I find that the courses at* [Name of School] *allow for the expression and integration of my religious beliefs into the coursework. This is my first experience as a student in an Adventist institution and I appreciate being able to freely express my faith in the "classroom"*

(Interviewee No. 4).

When the interviewers asked which course features had had the greatest impact on students' spiritual lives, their top choices paralleled the indicators of faith presence (see Figure 2). The course content can reflect an Adventist worldview. The discussion forums can build learning community, clarify a Christian approach to the course topics, and motivate students to live an Adventist lifestyle and engage in mission experiences such as outreach, volunteer service, and other church-related activities. Worship, as an indicator of faith presence, was also confirmed, with the choice of online week of prayer and class devotionals in second and third place, respectively.

One student was a bit critical of the spiritual atmosphere of her classes, as shown in her comment,

As it is online class, everyone can be hypocritical as you don't know if in reality they practice what they preach. . . . (Interviewee No. 5). She admitted, however, that *I have baseline spirituality even prior to my studies.* But when asked which course features made an impact on her spiritual life, she readily cited the *online chapel, online week of prayer, and personal interactions with classmates.* It appears that special worship events and relationships appeal even to students who do not consider themselves to be highly spiritual.

Faith Presence in an Online Classroom

To include all the indicators of faith presence in each class will not be easy to accomplish without both the intentionality of IFL on the part of the teachers and the active involvement of the students. This should be reflected in the desired course outcomes, which form the basis for choosing appropriate content presentation, learning activities, and assessments. Below are some ideas on how to accomplish this in an online classroom.

The Online Devotional

Many teachers who teach online classes at Adventist universities normally begin their classes with a devotional that they post on the Web. However, there is no guarantee that students will read these devotions; much less understand them. To encourage engagement with the devotional, teachers can prepare accompanying discussion questions or activities that will require the students to interact with the message and with one another. Further, teachers must strive to make the devotional one of the most exciting sections in each lesson so that students will engage with it without feeling forced to do so. (Read the article "Creative Online Devotionals" on page 35 of this issue.)

Figure 2. Course Features Rated as Having the Greatest Impact on Students' Spiritual Lives.

Which feature(s) of the online courses had an impact on your spiritual life?
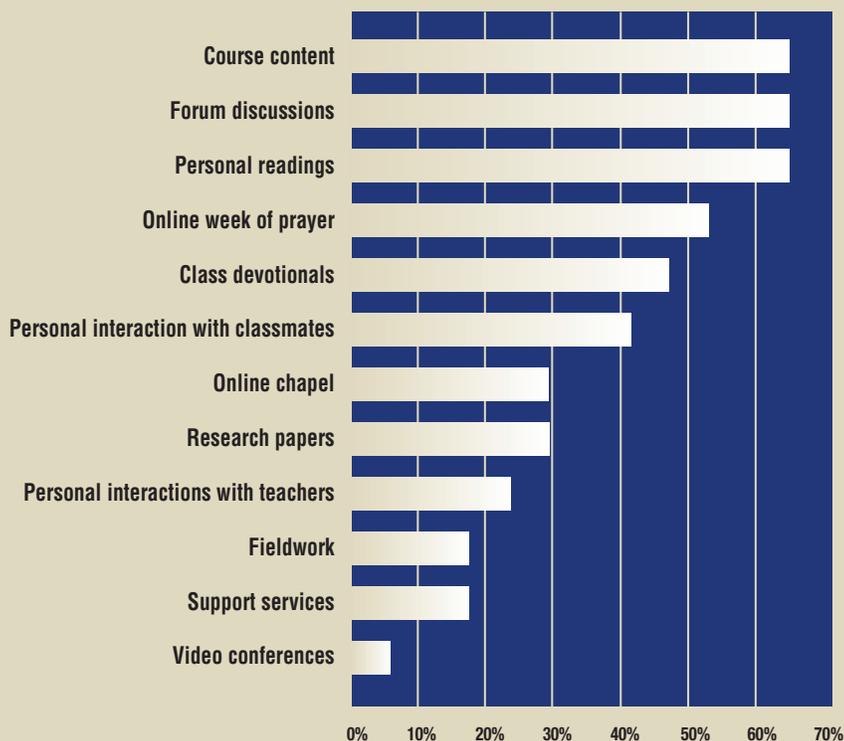
Faith Presence in the Course Content

The vast amount of information available on the Web, as well as the wealth of electronic books, resources, and software, makes presentation of course content online easier than in the past. However, since many of these materials are not written by Adventist authors, it can be a challenge to use these materials to present a worldview that supports principles of Adventist education when creating the curriculum. When students read the lessons on their own, they may not easily understand the topics within the context of Adventist beliefs and principles.

For this reason, teachers may opt to prepare their own lecture videos to be sure class topics contain the right perspective, but these should be short because lengthy videos are not only difficult to access but also unlikely to hold the students' attention.

Teachers can also include, as a primary resource, a contents page that presents each lesson according to an Adventist worldview, to which other sources can be linked as needed. In doing so, teachers can help students understand course content within the context of Christian principles that are hallmarks of Adventist education, like the Great Controversy theme, God's workings in the physical universe and human history, as well as values such as truth, honesty, caring, and love. Whether students are studying mathematics or chemistry, literature or history, religion or health, when reading the lessons on their own, they can reflect on these principles and apply them to their own lives.

Faith Presence in Learning Activities

Learning activities in an online class are generally organized as forum discussions, assignments, and major projects. The forum discussion, which can be considered the hub of online activities, brings the class to life. This is where learning communities are created, and where faith communities can be formed.[13] Through proper facilitation, students can interact with content (thereby gaining an Adventist worldview), with teachers and classmates (strengthening relationships), with self (reflecting on personal applications), with the environment (caring for other people and nature), and, most importantly, with God during devotional forums. The many purposes of the forum underscore the importance of careful preparation of discussion questions and active facilitation by the teacher.

Assignments and projects, on the other hand, may be designed to provide opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in service to the church and to reflect, through journals or research papers, on the lesson's impact on their lifestyle, values, and spiritual life. As Ellen G. White emphasized, "Knowledge is power, but it is power for good only when united with true piety. It must be vitalized by the Spirit of God in order to serve the noblest purposes."[14] Such assignments and projects help strengthen faith presence in the online classroom.

Faith Presence in the Classroom Environment

The greatest attraction of online education is that it enables students to access the online classroom at the time and place most convenient for them. Unfortunately, this strength also contributes to a lack of connectedness and challenges regarding personal discipline and time management. (See the article by Anthony Williams et al. on page 22 of this issue.) There is a fine line between flexibility and discipline. But every student must experience godly interactions and dealings from their teachers while they are developing the skills associated with online learning as they seek to reach God's ideal for them. Every online teacher must understand that the student is the focus of every learning activity—not the instructor, the content, the project, or the class regulations.

Conclusion

Faith development is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit.[15] Educators merely create an environment in which the Holy Spirit works and where faith can be exercised. To accomplish this goal, teachers and course designers must focus their effort on planning online learning experiences more than they do with their course Webpages.

When preparing class lectures, teachers should emphasize thought processes and the worldview from which the topics are presented. When designing learning activities, they need to focus on creating an atmosphere where relationships and the faith community are nourished, Adventist lifestyle is promoted, and engagement in missions is encouraged.

Equally important, they must ensure that a devotional activity that calls for active worship is present in every class. These approaches to creating faith presence will help ". . . furnish knowledge as enduring as eternity"[16] by nurturing faith development and helping students retain what is most important and of permanent value. ✐

This article has been peer reviewed.

Leni T. Casimiro, PhD, *is the Director of AIIAS Online at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. With more than 16 years of experience in the field of online education, Dr. Casimiro has done extensive research in designing online courses, with specific emphasis on faith integration and mission-oriented course designs, student engagement, online teaching strategies, quality standards, and learning analytics. She also serves as Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Online Learning at AIIAS.*

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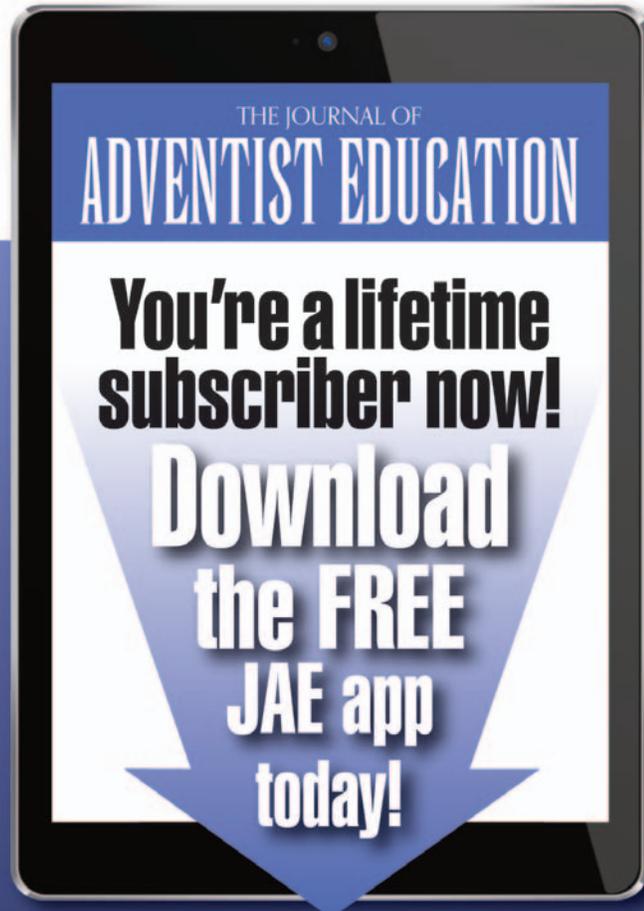
The Virtual Mentor Program:
An Initiative to Support First-year Students and Students at Risk

Students enter college and university from diverse backgrounds and life stages. The concept of a first-year student always being a recent high school graduate is a misnomer; many students come to higher education with significant life experience. The college/university culture of study is rarely the same as high school, making the transition difficult even for talented students. In many countries, the massification of higher education has opened up education to all, with the only limiting factors being a student's ability to meet entry requirements and pay for subjects.

Since online education allows for greater lifestyle flexibility, particularly for students with jobs, family commitments, and/or those who live far from a university, many first-time tertiary students are enrolling in online subjects. Such students confront dual issues: learning at the university level and learning in a new environment. These students experience additional stress because of the assumption that they know how to be autonomous learners who can manage their own learning and associated issues within the university setting. The combination of increased expectations and decreased personal contact with faculty and other students creates a complex challenge for academics at universities offering undergraduate degrees online. (See the article by Adam Fenner on page 30 of this issue.)

Even within the context of Seventh-day Adventist institutions that pride themselves on providing a high level of student support, students entering university for the first time often "hit the wall" when they experience difficulties. It matters not if students are traditional or online, they all experience difficulties at some time during their first year.

A virtual mentor program can provide support to all first-year students regardless of whether they are in online, blended, or traditional learning environments. One such initiative, implemented by The University of Newcastle in Newcastle, Australia, and later by Avondale College of Higher Education in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia, also supported students in other years of study experiencing difficulties who had been identified as "at risk."

While the challenges associated with unfamiliarity soon pass for most students, life and study stressors seem to inhibit others from overcoming such difficulties. In addition, even students who appear to be progressing well can experience sickness, bereavement, or psychological issues; difficulties which, if not identified early, may lead to a downward spiral ending with disengagement from their studies. In these worst-case scenarios, students with excellent academic abilities may leave their studies or just "fall between the cracks." Broadly, these students are referred to as "students at risk" because, for a variety of factors, they are not

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coping well and are likely to fail or drop out, often without being noticed. Students at risk require additional support, either short-term or for a longer duration. Even if they have ready access to a plethora of student-support services, students at risk often isolate themselves when they experience academic difficulty.

Large university class sizes make it difficult for academic staff, residential staff, advisors, chaplains, and even peers to notice individual students who are struggling. This problem is compounded in online environments. The broader implications of a failed or missed assignment may go unnoticed by one lecturer. Furthermore, failure or non-submission of assignments across multiple subjects may indicate a student's need for additional support, and this need may not be discovered until it is too late. Similarly, low levels of student access and/or engagement with a subject site within a Learning Management System (LMS) may signify a student experiencing difficulty with one subject, but low engagement across all LMS subject sites often indicates a student at risk. The cumulative effect surely indicates a problem, yet without the benefit of a LMS or similar tracking system, no single person at a university would be able to identify such a situation and respond before the student had failed multiple subjects or completely disengaged.

In most cases, higher education institutions offer adequate support services to help in these circumstances, but they are not always accessed by students. For students who seek help, support can usually be provided with relative ease, but identifying students needing support and providing assistance to the ones who isolate themselves remains a complex endeavor. While there is no single correct way to identify and support such students, leveraging the capacity of technology to assist in this process may offer a viable solution.

The Australian Context

Since the 1970s, considerable research has explored the issues of student retention and attrition in higher education. Research has confirmed the adverse impact of students withdrawing from a university before they obtain their degree, evident both in Australia[1] and internationally.[2] Student attrition not only affects the institution, but also the individual student and his or her family. Current funding models for the Australian higher education sector (HECS; FEE-HELP) and the United States (federal and private student loans) often leave students, regardless of subjects completed, with significant debt. Financial considerations aside, many other unfavorable outcomes could be avoided if retention were managed more efficiently.

Widespread concern has been expressed at the revelation that one-third of all university students contemplate withdrawing during their first year of study.[3] Within the context of Australia, the seminal work of McInnis et al.[4] is still relevant, as first-year students, according to Krause,[5] vacillate among three sometimes competing tensions:

• the relevancy to their lives of the program in which they are enrolled;

• perceptions of themselves as clients (from the marketing and service dimensions of their institution); and

• the disciplinary and academic integrity standards required by academics.

These tensions arguably contribute to students' withdrawal from a college or university. Several models attempt to explain student retention and attrition, and numerous approaches aimed at reducing attrition have been

explored and implemented among first-year university students attending universities in Australia. Strategies include attempts to increase levels of student engagement, the creation of learning communities, and tactics to construct academic and social integration. These strategies have been shown to positively influence student retention.[6]

The Identified Need

In 2013, the administration of Avondale College of Higher Education (Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia) conducted a pilot survey assessing all undergraduate students, which revealed that many first-year students were either unaware of or had not used their institution's support systems (e.g., learning support, counseling, subject-specific support, etc.). Highlighting these facilities and encouraging students to access them was seen as a first step in thwarting attrition and providing additional support to students in need.

Additionally, when large classes are the norm, students experiencing personal issues engage less, rarely ask for personal support, and often withdraw.[7] Schools need to develop mechanisms to assist in identifying and supporting such students at risk through guidance, tools, and support as needed. If struggling students are rapidly directed to support services, the rates of withdrawals, failure, and personal distress should decrease.

The benefits of creating an overall atmosphere in which students feel academically and socially connected and sustained have been proved in research. Lizzio[8] proposed that a student's experience of belonging could be created through developing an environment that consists of "five senses of success": connectedness, capability, resourcefulness, purpose, and culture. The creation of such an environment can positively enhance the experience of first-year students, specifically those who are feeling vulnerable and non-aligned.[9] Cementing student connections with academic institutions is vitally important, but academic interventions may be less effective if they lack an accompanying emphasis on the critical first-semester component of social connectedness.[10]

The Avondale Virtual Mentor Program

All subjects at Avondale College of Higher Education have an online/blended component and use Moodle as the LMS to work with students outside formal classes. To help identify all first-year students who were potentially at risk and offer them assistance, Avondale implemented the Virtual Mentor (VM) program. A part-time VM role was created to track students' progress and make contact with those who appeared to be experiencing difficulties. The VM reported to the vice president for academics and research.

Students were introduced to the VM on several occasions (including during online and face-to-face orientation, lectures, and tutorials) and by different people (including convenors, subject coordinators, administrative staff, and pastoral support staff). They were also informed about the roles and responsibilities of the VM through designated Learning Management System (LMS) Webpages.

When students failed an assessment item, or did not engage with LMS activities, the VM contacted them (usually by e-mail, sometimes by phone). After noting the student's lack of progress, the VM asked questions about a range of issues, including the following:

• whether the student had a particular problem;
• if the student needed extra support from a tutor; and/or
• if the student needed to discuss his or her career choice with a program officer or with Careers Services.

Where appropriate, students were encouraged to:
• obtain support from the university's Student Support Services;
• talk to a counselor; and/or
• meet with subject coordinators and/or program convenors (for residential students, the meetings would take place in person; for online students, as teleconferences).

The VM was tasked with fulfilling the following responsibilities:

• monitoring students' progress through the use of "Gradebook" (a facility within the institution's LMS that stores the marks on each assessment item for the subjects in which the students are enrolled);
• monitoring students' online engagement (LMS statistics allow the VM to identify how often students have accessed the LMS and which options they selected);
• contacting students who have failed an assessment item or have not participated in an online activity;
• maintaining subsequent and regular contact with students at risk;
• tracking students at risk across all their enrolled subjects;
• liaising with subject coordinators and alerting them to student problems;
• keeping records of what occurred;
• analyzing records and providing feedback about trends to faculty and program convenors;
• identifying best practices to support students during their first year at the university;
• facilitating student-staff relationships; and
• raising the visibility of at-risk or failing students with the VM and subsequently with instructors and academic advisors.

The Virtual Mentor's Activity

The VM maintained a centralized recording system and used a systematic approach to evaluate the components of each subject in which the students were enrolled, including their assessment timetable, discussion boards, etc., and ensured that a plan was developed in consultation with the college administration for all subjects.

The VM collected the following information, the highlights of which are shown in Table 1: (a) number of first-

Table 1. Size of Cohort and Discipline Profile (2006-2007).

Discipline	Total Number of Subjects	Total Student Subject Enrollment (Both online and traditional students)
Arts	13	319
Avondale Seminary	8	245
Business	5	117
Education	13	271
Nursing/Health	3	200
Science/Math	7	154
Total	49	1,306

year subjects; (b) overall number of subjects monitored by VM; (c) number of students enrolled in each unit, cohort, and discipline; and (d) number of subjects per discipline.

Student engagement levels were classified using the following Engagement Indicators, with the VM evaluating the students' LMS engagement across each of these domains to identify students who were potentially at risk:

1. Accessed LMS before the end of Week 2;

2. Downloaded Unit Outline before the end of Week 2;

3. Downloaded Student Information (PDF file including detailed assessment information) before the end of Week 3;

4. Accessed News Forum (announcement forum) before the end of Week 3;

5. Frequency of accessing the subjects during Weeks 4-6;

6. Click count during Weeks 4-6, including simply the number of mouse clicks the student made at the LMS site during that period;

7. Submission of Assessment Task 1 (and, if relevant, extension request);

8. Submission of Assessment Task 2 (and, if relevant, extension request); and

9. Submission of Assessment Task 3 (and, if relevant, extension request).

All VM activity was logged in a spreadsheet to allow correlation of records about individual students across multiple subjects. By monitoring Learning Management System activity, the VM was able to identify students who were performing poorly and at risk for failure.

When students failed to achieve any of the Engagement Indicators, they received a message from the system. The initial e-mail sent to students simply asked, "Is everything OK? It has been noticed you have not accessed your [Engagement Indicator] as yet." As indicated in Table 2, 80 e-mails were received in response to the more than 1,600 e-mails sent out, either thanking the VM for reminding them,

or requesting support or advice.

The VM's role was not an academic one, but rather to support and objectively advise students or direct them to the support appropriate for their difficulty. Interestingly, while the VM's contact was sufficient to resolve some students' issues, many other students did not respond to the message sent by the VM but simply acted upon its content. For those students who needed additional help, the objective advice of the VM proved invaluable.

The fact that the VM could monitor students' progress regarding the specified Engagement Indicators across subjects was critically important in ensuring rapid identification of students who might be at risk. Overall trends are easily overlooked by academic staff who are unaware of students' performance in other subjects. Furthermore, Subjects Convenors do not have the capacity to monitor the totality of individual students' progress in order to identify individual students who may be at risk.

Table 2 outlines the type and range of interactions documented by the VM. These data were drawn from the initial trial of the VM program, which revealed a number of issues relating to the protocols. It should also be noted that the number of personal issues recorded during this trial period was higher than would normally be expected, as two major car accidents involving college students occurred close to assessment dates, one resulting in a fatality. It was interesting to observe that the effects of these incidents were ob-

Table 2. Virtual Mentor Activity Profile (2006-2007).

Total number of e-mails sent	1,650
Number of individual students contacted because they showed signs of being at risk	63
Number of e-mails from students responding to VM	80
Number of referrals	28
Range of issues	**Percentage**
IT issues (connection issues, logon issues)	20
Technical issues (managing the computer system, online submission difficulties, monitoring plagiarism software)	
LMS issues (logon problems, ability to navigate the system)	30
Subject-related issues (enrollment, correct unit/credit enrollment issues, subjects compliance)	10
Assignment issues (all learning and activities that were assessed, questions relating to rubric)	10
Personal issues (accidents, death, illness)	20

servable by the VM through monitoring all the student LMS engagement in the subjects in which the students involved in the accidents were enrolled.

Insights Into Students' Responsiveness to Staff Engagement With LMS

Student LMS activity levels are major indicators of engagement, so Avondale students with a low LMS activity profile were targeted by the VM. For these students, any lack of LMS engagement resulted in a follow-up message from the VM, which reminded them to regularly access and engage with learning material online. Also of interest,

a high correlation was found between lecturers' LMS engagement and the LMS engagement of their students (see Figures 1 and 2). The VM monitored the interaction between students and lecturers as part of following the first-year cohort and students at risk.

While such correlations are noteworthy, the administrators' focus remained on monitoring students with low engagement profiles and then following up with such students. Kim et al. found considerable evidence suggested a direct correlation between students' level of engagement and their final grades. They also found that levels of student activity and engagement in asynchronous online discussions corre-

Figure 1. Student Engagement (Views) Increased With High Lecturer Engagement (Posts).


Figure 2. Student Engagement (Views) Decreased With Low-No Lecturer Engagement (Posts).
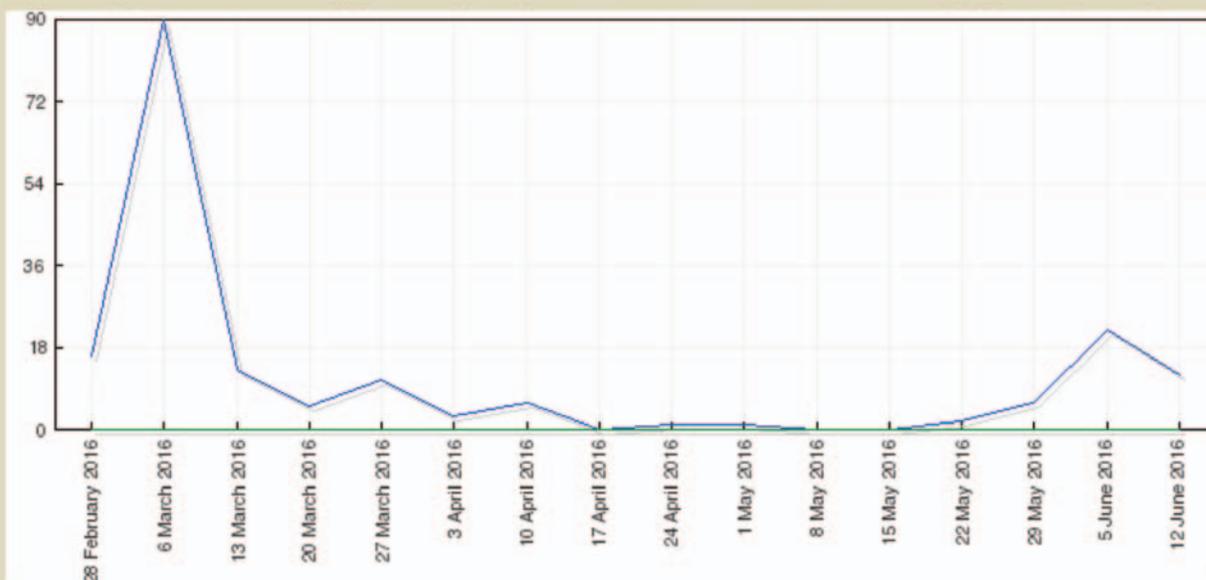
lated with final subject outcomes, specifically with reference to the domains of active participation (total time in LMS/discussion, frequency of LMS/discussion visit, number of postings), engagement with discussion topics (posting length, discussion time per visit), consistent effort and awareness (regularity of visits and time lapse between visits), and interaction (number of responses triggered by a post, number of replies to received responses). While engagement levels do correlate with success, lack of engagement by students early in a semester often indicates that they will experience difficulty in completing a subject.[11]

In a previous VM initiative at The University of Newcastle (Australia), engineering faculty tracked students, both online and traditional, withdrawal from a range of subjects.[12] Figure 3 shows the weeks in which withdrawals occurred across a range of subjects in the program. While most withdrawals occurred early in the semester, their frequency clearly accelerated toward the end of the semester and before the cut-off when an academic penalty would be recorded on a student's academic transcript. Figure 3 also shows that architecture and built-environment students withdrew at a significant rate. Many of the online learners were mature students who were working full time. Difficulties associated with time management are well known in the field and partially ex-

plain the trends shown in Figure 3. Surveys have shown that such students are, in the main, unaware of the support services available to them, thus exacerbating the challenges they face.

It is difficult to predict the full impact of the VM initiative due to the complex and diverse enrollment options available to students, though the number of first-year students having to "Show Cause" for their lack of progress while enrolled in a subject did provide some insight. Primarily in the frequency of "Show Cause," various students were asked to justify why they should remain enrolled in their selected program, as they had failed many subjects. Table 3, on the next page, shows that the number of "Show Cause" students remained relatively constant from 2006 to 2008.[13] Since the VM project started in 2007, a significant reduction in first-year students categorized as "Show Cause" and "at risk" had been achieved when the initiative was discontinued in 2012. This suggests that after the project was implemented, first-year students were better informed and became more strategically engaged with their studies. As the introduction of the VM initiative was the only change over this period (2006-2008), any successes can appropriately be attributed to the VM program. While success has been observed with first-year students, it ap-

Figure 3. Number of Withdrawals From Subjects at The University of Newcastle.
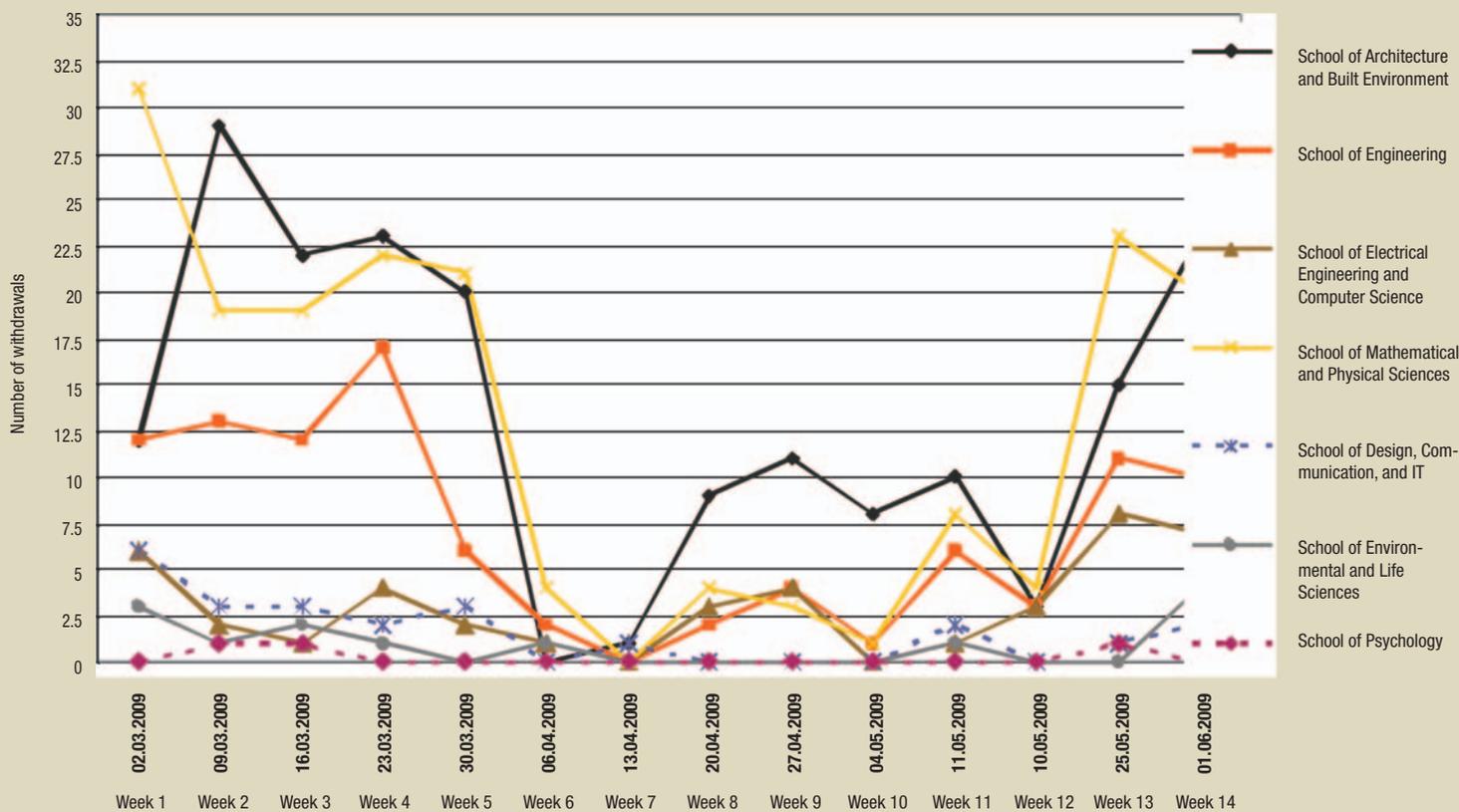
Table 3. Impact of VM Scheme on the Number of First-year Students Having to "Show Cause" at Avondale College of Higher Education (2006-2008).

Year	Number of "Show Cause" students	Number of first-year students	Percentage
2006	57	21	37 percent
2007 (1st year of VM initiative)	42	5	12 percent
2008	50	8	16 percent

pears that upper-division students were not being as strategic, indicating the VM role may need to be expanded.

We have considered the VM program thus far from the perspective of assistance to students experiencing academic difficulty, but there is an extra dimension to the program—the ability to identify at-risk students early and support the ones experiencing non-academic difficulties. In a blended learning and online environment where the breadth of issues can be difficult to establish, the VM initiative was able to observe changes to the engagement profiles of a significant number of students at both The University of Newcastle and Avondale. Follow-up with these students identified the need for additional emotional support following two serious incidents, and the VM was able to direct students to the appropriate services as required. Students do not often self-disclose when they experience difficulties, and the visual cues provided through tracking student-engagement profiles by the VM significantly assisted with identifying these issues.

Conclusion

The VM program has been successfully implemented in two institutions, in total over a nine-year period, at Avondale College of Higher Education and The University of Newcastle, and evidence supports its benefits to students, especially those studying in blended and online environments. Evidence also suggests an increase in students from non-traditional backgrounds studying at universities, specifically in the online environment, during the time the VM program was run at the two institutions.

Often, when confronted with the option of moving their classes online, lecturers claim that they find it difficult to teach students unless they can "look them in the eye." As more and more students choose to study online, subject designers and teachers will need to develop strategies that effectively support their transition to learning in this environment.

While these strategies need further development, researchers in the field continue to study the significant capacity of LMS analytic systems which, until now, have been underutilized. Systems that record student use of LMSs, through tracking and analysis of online data (analytics), regularly appear with reports of their success in the literature.

Agudo-Peregrina et al.[14] outlined three "system-independent" interaction classifications: those based on the agent (student-student, student-teacher, student-content); those based on frequency of use (Most Used—transmission of content; Moderately Used—discussions; student assessment/ evaluation; and Rarely Used—subjects/teacher/satisfaction evaluation surveys, computer-based instruction); as well as classification based on participation mode (active vs. passive interaction). They evaluated the relationship of each component against academic performance across two different learning modalities (blended learning and online learning), and developed an extraction and reporting plug-in tool for the LMS to automatically classify interactions into the appropriate category.

Results indicated that student academic performance correlated to active interaction across each system classification, but only in purely online learning (not correlated to blended learning). LMS systems thus have a great deal of potential, and as Cerezo et al.[15] highlighted, recent advances in the use of educational data mining in LMS can assist, identify, and predict students' learning styles, effort expended, and learning achievement.

As these two examples show, great potential exists for the application of LMS analytics to enrich initiatives like the VM program. As program administrators and researchers, we must undertake the task of writing protocols for the complex analytics that will enhance and ultimately improve our capacity to effectively and successfully support students. The ability to identify students experiencing difficulty and simply acknowledge that difficulty by asking, "Is everything okay?" before providing or directing them toward appropriate additional support enables teachers in blended and online environments the capability to almost "look their students in the eye." ✐

This article has been peer reviewed.

Anthony Williams, PhD, *is a Professor of Education at Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia. Dr. Williams has worked at universities in Australia for more than 30 years. Prior to teaching at Avondale, he was the Head of the School of Architecture and Built Environment at The University of Newcastle in Callaghan, New South Wales. Dr. Williams has won in excess of A$2M competitive research grants, including nearly 20 externally funded grants in the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching. He has also won a National Award of Teaching Excellence in the Area of Physical Sciences and Related Studies. Dr. Williams has been involved in producing 400 publications, many of which relate to the scholarship of teaching and learning.*

Maria Northcote, PhD, *is Associate Professor and the Director of the Centre for Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Avondale College of Higher Education. She is an experienced higher education teacher, leader, and researcher, and is involved in undergraduate and postgraduate education and professional development. Her research interests include threshold concepts, educational technology, online teaching, and professional learning.*

Peter Kilgour, MathsEdD, **MACE,** *is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Christian Education Research Centre at Avondale College of Higher Education. His research areas include mathematics education, multicultural education, innovative teaching, online education, school administration, and classroom environments. He has worked as a secondary mathematics teacher, school principal, and education system CEO. Dr. Kilgour has written key publications in the areas of humanizing the online learning experience, academic streaming in mathematics in schools, monitoring the racial attitudes of tertiary students, assessment types in tertiary education, faith formation in Christian schools, and child protection in Christian schools.*

Ben Stewart, BA, *graduated from Avondale College of Higher Education in December 2017 with a Bachelor of Arts in Counseling Psychology. He was a recipient of a Summer Scholarship, an award involving the full spectrum of research activities in this project, and was a major contributor to this article. Mr. Stewart is planning to continue his studies in psychology (Honours) and has several research interests, including intrinsic motivation (education and religious), enhancing psychological well-being through adventure and nature contact, and developing resilience during change and transition.*

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Building Relationships for Ministry to Online Students

After several years of teaching in traditional brick-and-mortar environments, I now teach exclusively online at the undergraduate level. I miss the impromptu meetings with students in the hallway and the way people respond to positive feedback face to face. However, teaching online does not mean that traditional teachable moments disappear; they simply change place, time, and modality. Furthermore, the relationships so crucial to the professional, social, and spiritual development of students are not only possible, but also capable of thriving online. However, these essential elements to online student development do not result from random happenstance; they require intentionality and commitment—just as they do in traditional learning environments.

E-mail has proved to be my most powerful tool for building relationships and furthering my ministry with online students. Although students see my video likeness and hear my voice regularly throughout the course in introductory videos and video lectures, this is not as personal as my being able to meet them face to face. But when videos are combined with the intimacy of personalized e-mail text, this provides a humanizing element that helps to conquer the digital divide.

After trying several different approaches to connect with students and attempting to create the nurturing faith community Adventist education aims to provide, I have found 10 e-mail practices that have proved effective. I like to think of these as building on one another in sequence, not only for the purpose of providing students with a positive online experience, but also with the goal of building a relationship for witnessing.

1. Regularly e-mail online students.

I try to e-mail my students personalized messages at least once every week. Because students are not forced to enter a physical classroom during their daily schedule, many of them need frequent reminders about the existence of their instructor and the course. It can be easy for them to ignore or forget what only exists in the digital world, especially those students who are new to online learning or the digital environment in general.

Additionally, e-mails may be one of the very few contacts students receive from the institution. This is a chance to engage students not only in the context of the course, but also with the institution.

Connecting with students through e-mail also documents the student-instructor relationship. This can be useful for situations as diverse as in-

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forming the university's academic support office of students' struggles with a course, recording problems with technology that can be passed to the appropriate IT professionals for correction, or—as unfortunate as it may be—documenting violations such as plagiarism for possible disciplinary action.[1]

2. Respond promptly to students' communications.

In today's constantly connected society, people have come to expect instant gratification, contributing to short attention spans. Customer service is not something at which tenured professors or academic institutions often excel, yet we should. Students in today's world are customers who have many options—if displeased with some aspect of a program, they can and will go elsewhere for a quality education, even a quality Adventist education. This is especially true in online learning, where the costs are often lower than traditional schooling, and physical location has little to no import.[2] Students can easily leave an online class and institution for another online alternative.

Furthermore, if students have a question or problem, how else are they supposed to deal with these issues? For all they know, their instructor is their only advocate at the institution. They rely on online professors to be reliable and productive in their communication. Although addressing students' e-mails within 24 hours of receiving them can be a challenge, it has been my experience that students regularly state their appreciation for prompt responses. If the schedule is heavily structured and does not allow a response within 24 hours, I let students know that e-mails will be answered at specific times of the day or days of the week, which will allow them to better anticipate a response.[3]

3. Follow through on e-mails.

Often, student e-mails sent to me are really intended for someone else, or contain questions or issues I cannot address. Sometimes, students fail to communicate effectively, leaving me guessing about what they are trying to convey. However, I try to follow through with each student inquiry, whether it's my domain or not. I will call them if necessary or give them the e-mail address or phone number of someone who can help them. I keep a record of items I referred so I can follow up to ask the student via e-mail if his or her issue was resolved. Students in undergraduate online courses are often young and inexperienced, perhaps distracted by a life crisis, and commonly have to work several jobs to make ends meet. Older students often struggle with maintaining a family, work, and life balance in addition to taking courses online. Whatever the issue, students may need help navigating the online education experience. The professor's willingness to be their advocate can make the difference between an enjoyable semester or quarter and a disappointing one. Every encounter matters—whether online or face to face.

4. Carefully monitor the tone of e-mails.[4]

I always start my e-mails with "Dear [Student's Name]." With the busy pace of life in the digital age and the desensitization that can accompany social media's blunt and brisk nature, civility can easily slip away, rendering us no longer as courteous as we once were in educational settings. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication can prove difficult in any medium, as expectations vary greatly and in ways of which we aren't even aware.[5] Sensitivity through the tone of our communication can help overcome some of the cultural distance and smooth over any social *faux pas* that may occur. When we're sensitive to students and demonstrate our interest

through language and tone, students know we care about them.

Remember, because of the digital divide, we are dealing with substantially less information than we would have in face-to-face relationships, and the potential for miscommunication using e-mail is high.[6] Lacking body language and tonal cues, it can be easy to misinterpret students' messages, and for them to misunderstand ours.

In e-mail correspondence, when a student complains about something, or is upset, perhaps even furious about an issue, it is appropriate to demonstrate empathy and concern. If the complaint is specific to the course and it is confirmed that the instructor is at fault, an apology is appropriate. Instructors should be careful, however, to avoid apologizing on behalf of anyone else or the institution, since this could be interpreted as admission of responsibility and expose the individual or institution to financial liability should the complaint result in litigation. Faculty and staff may not be aware of all aspects of an issue, and may only hear the student's perspective. An apology, therefore, should only be rendered by the person involved in a dispute, and only if wrongdoing has been found.

While offering an "I'm sorry" and expressing concern about an issue is not always easy, it can make a world of difference for a person who is struggling with a personal issue of which the instructor may be unaware. This does not imply always letting students have their way. It is quite possible to affirm while simultaneously being firm. Doing so in a way that that is empathetic and honest can bring closure to an issue quickly and simply.

5. Be specific.

I try to avoid saying, "great job" or "you did great work" about an assignment unless I follow these words with a detailed, descriptive response that

> It is important for teachers to model how to respond to shared work and to provide students with guidelines for responding to the same. This can be particularly valuable when contrasting opinions or findings are demonstrated, which can translate directly to teachable moments.

communicates what did or did not work well on an assignment. This builds students' confidence in their abilities and shows them ways to improve. Without meaningful feedback, students will have no way of knowing whether they are on the right track or how to improve their work.[7]

6. Showcase great work.[8]

I e-mail outstanding classwork to the entire class. This gives the class a benchmark for higher-level work, and offers positive reinforcement to high performers. It is important for teachers to model how to respond to shared work and to provide students with guidelines for responding to the same. This can be particularly valuable when contrasting opinions or findings are demonstrated, which can translate directly to teachable moments. For example, when the topic of Islam and women comes up in my history classes, emotions typically run high, and people usually want to share their often strong and contrary perspectives. In this delicate environment, I always ask permission to share student work

with the class before doing so, and would strongly recommend this as good practice. Not asking permission can result in a breach of trust with a student, and potentially lead to students submitting complaints to the school's administration.

7. Ask questions of students.

Asking students about themselves and what they think about a particular topic is essential to building strong student-instructor relationships. People like being recognized as unique, and they appreciate those who reach out and attempt to build constructive relationships. This is an important part of the digital environment, which by its very nature can be dehumanizing. Also, it can be difficult to remember that there is a person on the other end of an e-mail or computer screen. Asking students questions that nurture rather than dehumanize not only helps them feel appreciated, but it also reminds the instructor of their uniqueness.[9]

8. Move the public to the private.

Discussion board interaction is required in my classes. However, moving students to a private discussion can be productive because it helps build the relationships that I enjoy and they deserve. I often find something with which I either agree or disagree in a student's work, and e-mail him or her about it. Students appreciate their ideas being taken seriously, and private messages reassure them that I support and care about their personal and educational journey. Long e-mail threads often result from such exchanges, and relationships are built in this manner.

With the success of relationship building between students and teachers also comes the danger of becoming overly familiar and crossing established boundaries that ignore appropriate student-teacher roles. No matter how open or confident I am in my relationship with a student, I never sign

an e-mail with my first name. Also, it is inappropriate for the teacher to divulge information of a sensitive nature, or that might jeopardize the student's success in the class or another class he or she may take in the future. Teachers should be careful to avoid misunderstandings and unethical behavior when interacting with students. Setting boundaries and keeping within them should always be the norm, and yet such restrictions need not become detrimental to connecting with students.[10]

9. Be vulnerable.

Students notice when teachers and professors are open with them. Being open and vulnerable allows people into one's life and thoughts, and this is a reliable way to form trusting relationships. I regularly share personal experiences and my own philosophical questions with my students because it lets them know they aren't alone in their struggles and enables them to better relate to me. When students trust educators, not only do they enjoy their learning experiences more, but they also want to perform better.[11] Every student with whom I have had a reasonably good relationship online has performed better in my course as a result.

10. Witness through e-mail.

College students, regardless of age or stage of maturity, often question their faith. Perhaps no other time in a person's life is more crucial to his or her faith journey. Sometimes, when students go through a crisis of faith, no one is aware of it.[12]

I have found a number of ways to connect with students spiritually. One is to integrate faith into the course content as much as possible. In my video lectures, I pose spiritual questions and ask students to pause the video and respond to my queries. On the discussion board, I ask questions that are overtly religious and spiritual, and require my students to interact with one another in their responses.

At times, students who are not Ad-

ventists feel unable or uncomfortable answering these questions or fulfilling an assignment, so I work to solve this problem on an individual, person-to-person level, which often means making accommodations that benefit both the student and the class.

Whenever students indicate that they might be questioning the church, God, or their faith in general, I reach out via e-mail. I try not to miss the opportunity to support students' vertical relationship with God when they say they are struggling with their faith, but I also seek to create an environment that encourages all students to think spiritually and to share their thoughts and feelings. This way, even when they aren't openly stating their questions or thoughts, they are at least presented with opportunities to do so.

When I respond to a student with the intent of witnessing to him or her, I always consider the individual's faith journey. I avoid assumptions about students as much as possible, and instead try to delve deeper into *what*

they are dealing with and then explore *why* they might be dealing with that particular issue. This can be easily done without passing judgment, or being dogmatic or prescriptive.

I attempt to garner as much information about a student's experience with an issue before addressing it. When I ask students about a spiritual issue, they will usually elaborate on how it relates to them, but eventually they will ask me questions about it. At that point, when a student raises a spiritual question with me, I generally feel comfortable enough to respond by sharing the Adventist message.

If instructors and professors have established positive relationships with students and have demonstrated vulnerability and honesty with them, they can make a huge difference in students' lives at this crucial time. Often, getting students to open up about an issue further or even to explore their own thoughts requires greater openness from me. I divulge reflections and experiences from my own faith jour-

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The author explores many of the practical and theoretical adjustments required by online teaching. The book is filled with powerful examples, research, and useful explanations, making it of interest to anyone involved in online education.

ney on a regular basis to my students, and have often been surprised by the positive results.

I have been in contact with some of my students for years after their class concluded. Online students will request recommendations for jobs and other schools from me, but many students will also e-mail me about issues of faith they face years after our initial relationship began via e-mail. Several students continue to write, call, or visit me for spiritual guidance years after I had them in class. It's these opportunities for mentorship and positive relationships that help provide the added value of Adventist education. Everyone needs someone he or she can trust and connect with spiritually, and I am happy to serve in that role anytime.

My initial reluctance to teach online was unfounded. It has been my experience that it is possible—and for some students, even more effective—for teachers to build and maintain meaningful relationships with students online. The fact that my online students regularly write to me to discuss their faith and to share their concerns and successes validates my opinion that Adventist education can be effective in the online environment as in the traditional classroom. ✎

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Adam Fenner, PhD, *is Director of the Adventist Learning Community, sponsored by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Dr. Fenner finds satisfaction in coordinating the development of ministry training and teacher-certifi-*

cation courses that will make professional development only a click away for lay members and church employees alike. He earned his doctorate from American University in Washington, D.C., and his specialty is U.S.-Latin American relations. He has taught history in Honduras and currently teaches world history online at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. While pursuing his doctorate, he worked professionally as a freelance researcher at the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

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8. For a demonstration of how showcasing student work has proved effective in teaching Common Core standards, see Ross Brewer, "Using Anchor Papers to Help Teachers and Students Understand the Common Core" (August 2012): http://www.exemplars.com/blog/education/using-anchor-papers-to-help-teachers-and-students-under stand-the-common-core; and for a resource dealing with showcasing student work in higher education, see Winona State University's "Enhancing Student Learning: Seven Principles for Good Practice": http://www. crlt.umich.edu/gsis/p4_6.

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Creative Online Devotionals
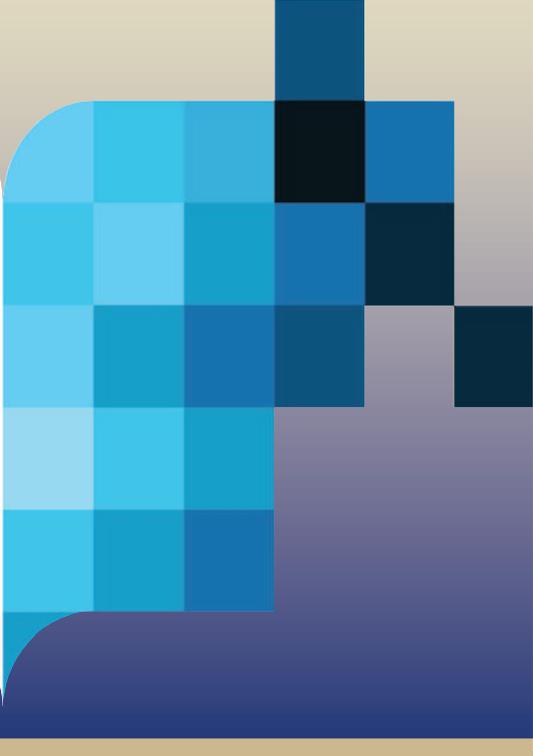
I had just finished preparing and polishing a devotional message for one of the online classes offered at my university when, on my way home, I encountered a familiar on-campus student who happened to also be taking online classes. Out of curiosity, I asked if he was reading the devotional section of his class. He answered "Uhmm . . . sometimes . . . but, honestly, I usually skip it because I want to go straight to the week's topic . . . ." His response was discouraging to me, especially after all the effort the professors put into integrating faith in the online classes through carefully planned devotionals. This encounter led me to ask: How can teachers of online classes make class devotionals more engaging for online students?

According to Ellen White, the Bible should hold the first place in schools[1] for the "first great lesson in all education is to know and understand the will of God,"[2] "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5, NKJV).[3] Studying the Scriptures not only fulfills this mission of Adventist education, but also provides the academic preparation for higher learning because it is in turning to God that we can reach a "higher plane of intelligence."[4] When studying the Scriptures, "the mind expands and becomes more evenly balanced than if occupied in obtaining information from books that have no connection with the Bible."[5] Thus, Ellen White asserts, "devo-

tional exercises and the study of the Scriptures should not be overlooked."[6]

Undoubtedly, creating a God-centered worship experience in an online classroom can be very challenging. Without direct teacher guidance, how can students be led to experience true worship? A common practice is the creation of a virtual space in their online course where teachers can post inspirational quotations, Bible texts, or inspirational thoughts. While these posts on the course Webpage help create a Christian atmosphere, they can also appear to be mere add-ons, particularly when they are unrelated to the course content. Students can skip them in order to go straight to the course requirements and activities. Even if they are read, there is no guarantee that the students will interact with the message. A devotional message that is unrelated to the course topic will provide little support for a biblical approach to the lesson.

Online devotionals, therefore, need to be planned and designed so that they will engage students. The uniqueness of the online modality demands creative worship activities that enable participants to personally experience God's presence and that draw them together in a faith community despite their geographic distances. During His earthly ministry, Jesus presented the truth in creative ways to make it personally appealing to each of His listeners. He

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"sought access to the people by the pathway of their most familiar associations," presenting the truth in ways that it became "intertwined with their most hallowed recollections and sympathies," making them "feel the completeness of His identification with their interests and happiness."[7]

The online environment has unique advantages that can enhance a well-planned devotional activity. For example, the *asynchronous* component (activities and discussions that take place outside of class time) of online devotionals gives students ample time to reflect on the message, share thoughts with one other, and build relationships. Teachers can also create activities related to the devotional message without the time constraints or space limitations. Technology can leverage the limitations caused by distance and assist teachers in creating successful devotionals in the online environment.

Six Principles for Designing Online Devotionals

The following principles can help ensure that online devotionals serve their purpose. Rarely will all of them be used in one activity, but it is best to consider all of them when preparing devotional plans for the entire course (whether a quarter or semester).

Principle 1: *Devotionals must be Christ-centered and seek to lead students to an active worship experience with God.*

Design implication: A read-only message is not enough. Be intentional in leading the students to reflect on the message either through an accompanying discussion forum or a reflection journal. If possible, give selected students an opportunity to lead a class devotional.

Principle 2: *Devotionals must encourage students to share their faith or strengthen one another's faith in God, thereby supporting the development of a faith community.* Although faith develops from a personal relationship with God, the value of a nurturing faith community in a school setting is valuable for students' faith development.

Design implication: Encourage interaction among the members of the class through discussions or simple group activities that accompany a devotional message.

Principle 3: *Devotionals must provide students with opportunities to practice Christian values or lifestyle and engage in mission.*

Design implication: Create student activities related to the message. Discussions may be interspersed with other activities like personal applications, interacting with the students' local communities, and the like.

Principle 4: *The devotional message should be part of the complete lesson package.* As a beginning activity, it can serve as a vantage point in incorporating the lesson within an Adventist worldview.

Design implication: Prepare devotional messages connected to the course topic.

Principle 5: *Devotional activities should be varied and de-signed to create excitement and surprise with the goal of fostering student engagement.*

Design implication: Vary the interactive components, presentation style, and media. Students may be asked to interact with the message, with a Bible text, with one another, or with significant social issues. Interacting with classmates may be done at the class level or school-wide in all distance or online courses. The message may be teacher-led or student-led. Instructors may also choose to include in the syllabus specific guidelines for student-led devotional presentations. Presentation may be via text, video, or other media.

Principle 6: *A spiritual activity is more meaningful if it is voluntary.* Participation in the devotional need not be graded unless it plays a significant role in the lesson outcomes. Active student participation results from active teacher facilitation and well-designed devotionals.

Design implication: Encourage active student participation through engaging and well-planned devotionals.

If teachers practice these principles when creating online devotionals, this will result in a variety of devotional experiences, making the devotional section of the online course one of the most exciting sections of the class, one that students will look forward to each time they log in.

Creative Ideas for Online Devotionals

Creating devotional activities can be fun, and the task can be shared by teachers and students. Here are some examples of online devotionals, class-level and school-wide, that reflect the principles listed above. These are taken from actual fully online graduate-level courses at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS), Silang, Cavite, Philippines.

The Class Devotional Activity

One of the goals of the course Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Methods in Speaking and Listening is for the students to practice speaking the English language. The devotional activities provide a good venue for students to not only take the lead in sharing inspirational messages but also for the teacher to observe students' speech. In a recent class, students became actively involved in the activity as they took turns leading the devotional through video presentations.

A seminary class in Hebrew used the online devotionals to show the value of learning this ancient language in order to better understand the Bible. This generated active class discussions. As a result, students developed greater appreciation for their lessons.

Public health deals with community service through promotion of preventive health practices and environmental protection. It is, therefore, fitting for teachers in this field to develop devotionals that call for students to go out to the community to apply what they have learned. The online class Principles of Environmental Health used a de-

votional activity to raise the students' awareness of their responsibility for the environment.

Preparing a devotional message that is related to technical topics in business classes may be challenging. But devotionals can help clarify biblical principles for business practices. Thus, a class in Marketing Management made Jesus the model in supplying the needs of human beings.

When studying the topic "Approaches to Working Closely With Teachers," the Supervision of Instruction class highlighted the value of having a good influence on others. Thus, after reading a short devotional message, the students were assigned the following activity:

> **As we study this week's lesson, may we value the importance of building relationships that inspire people to be the best they can. This week, find at least three friends you want to influence for good. Post their names in the Devotional Forum, and we will pray for them.**

This helped the students to become more aware of their own influence and their responsibility for others. Praying for others was also a positive experience. Below are sample testimonies of students in the class.

> **Re: I'll be praying for you**
> by Chipo Gwizo–Tuesday, 2 August 2016, 4:56 PM
>
> *Amen. It is very encouraging to know that someone is praying for you, especially your professor. As teachers we need to pray for our students and for one another.*
>
> **Re: You are not an inconvenience!**
> by Ebenezer Danquah–Wednesday, 3 August 2016, 9:41 PM
>
> *Nobody is an inconvenience when we truly show love. Thank you for instilling this in the class.*

Handling a devotional activity in a large class may sound daunting, but a class on Instructional Models successfully involved all of its students in leading class devotionals by dividing them into groups of three, with each member being assigned a specific task. The set-up of the class devotional is described in their Webpage shown below.

The preceding examples are just a few of the many ways

The Chapel Forum
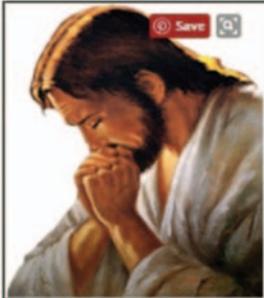
Welcome to our CHAPEL. This is the area where we can come together to commune with God and inspire one another. Jesus, our Master Teacher, had enough strength to face the challenges in this world because he read the Scriptures and prayed daily.

As we go through this class journey, all of us stand in need of help. We need help of all kinds, the most important of which is God's presence in all that we do. May the prayer of the Psalmist be ours as he said in Psalm 139:23,24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I encourage you to enter this CHAPEL each week and every time you need the special touch of God. Our Class members will leadinng out in this chapel session each week, by groups. Check your names from the list below:

Group 1: Danilo, Chipo, Edgar
Group 2: Amon, Blessing, Miranda
Group 3: Phanuel, Sheri, Suzett
Group 4: Aurell, Gianina, Kalchen
Group 5: Analyn, Henok, Teresita
Group 6: Arlen, Juvilyn, Thang
Group 7: Jocelyn Sara, September
Group 8: Evelyn and Ye Shin

Each week's chapel will have three components (indicating three discussion topics of the chapel forum each week) as led out by the designated group. Each week in this chapel forum the designated group will (a) post a video clipping (link would do) of a song that the members can listen to/sing along: (b) share a short message as a written script (less than 300 words) or personalized video (not more than 3 minutes); and (c) conduct a prayer session where a prayer will be posted by the group. All members are welcome to share your reflections in all three of these components of the chapel. For example, it will be wonderful for us to share prayer requests and be interceding for one another in component (c).

class devotionals may be designed. Here are some examples of sample strategies that can be used:

1. *Bible text(s)*. The students study and meditate on Bible verses related to the class topic.

2. *Values*. Bible-based values related to the lesson are emphasized and discussed, either through case studies or illustrative stories.

3. *Community* (outreach, mission). As part of the devotional message, students are asked to go out to the community, meet people, and engage in mission-oriented activities.

4. *Testimony*. Class participants share personal testimonies.

5. *Prayer*. Devotional hour can be compared to a Prayer Garden, where the focus is communicating with God. Participants pray for and with others.

6. *Music*. Devotional time is centered on singing songs of praise and thanksgiving that focus the mind on God. Students may share favorite songs to be sung singly, in groups, or as a whole class through videoconference (this can be accomplished during *synchronous* meeting times, with or without accompaniment).

7. *Inspirational stories*. The devotional message may be based on an inspirational story that becomes the basis for reflection.

8. *Object lessons*. Each member of the class can show objects (photo or video) and discuss their biblical significance or any lesson that can be learned from them.

Special Spiritual Events

In addition to the regular devotionals, teachers can create special spiritual events to give their students additional opportunities to experience devotional life in a larger faith community. These include the online spiritual retreat and the online week of prayer.

• *Online Spiritual Retreat*. A spiritual retreat is commonly required in the AIIAS seminary class Ministry and Spiritual Life in order to provide students with an opportunity to experience spiritual growth and renewal. Achieving the same goal in an online

Figure 1. Topics for the AIIAS Online Week of Prayer, 2015-2017.
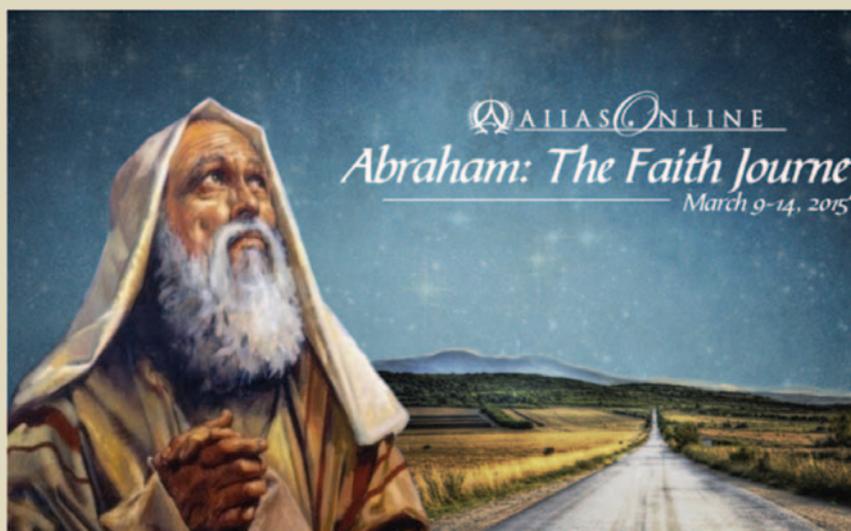
Yanina C. Jimenez

environment is obviously challenging, but it is possible.

Because online students cannot assemble as a group, they can be instructed to assemble a small group of people of their own choosing, who are willing to participate in the spiritual activity. Each student receives a clear, step-by-step guide (using text and video instructions), including what Bible text or message to read, what to discuss, when to pray, and anything else that needed to be done as part of the activity. The students are then asked to report in the forum area their experiences as they conducted their retreat. The result can be seen in this testimony by one of the students[8]:

By Alain Angerville – Monday, 19 April 2010, 10:41 PM. *First of all I have to say this retreat was wonderful. It is the first time I have [had] a retreat for myself. I held retreat for young people, for Sabbath school classes, for elders, and church members. I conducted a day of prayer and fasting. For the first time, for as long as I can remember, I was "at the center" of a retreat. I was not talking to people, showing them God's ways. But during this AIIAS retreat I was face-to-face with God, listening to Him. I learnt that as pastors and administrators we need to spend time with God even and especially when we are busy. I was not able to plan for this retreat long before because I have a very crowded schedule; [I] made a plan for at least six months before [and] was able to spend six hours with God. I spent time telling God not about people or about church business, but about myself. I took time to open my heart to Him, telling Him about my present, asking Him to scan my life, to visit every content of my mind, and asking Him also to control my entire life.*

• *Online Week of Prayer.* The interactive online week of prayer aims to provide online students with a focused worship experience outside their academic subjects. Just like the one held on campus, it consists of daily messages, singing, and prayer sessions. It also features counseling, sharing testimonies, and prayer circles. To make sure participants understand the message, the teacher creates a discussion forum where they can talk about the message rather than just read it or listen to it.

Since participation is voluntary, the program is carefully designed to make it as attractive, personal, and inclusive as possible for all students, regardless of their religion or cultural background. Topics are carefully chosen so that even non-Adventist students—Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims alike—feel comfortable participating. Figure 1 on page 38 illustrates the topics chosen by AIIAS Online during the past three years.

The people designing the program set out to create a week of prayer that would have a personal impact despite the absence of face-to-face contact; a program that was inclusive for those of other faiths and yet remained truly Adventist. Speakers and prayer leaders were invited from around the world to represent the geographical areas where the students lived. To ensure that the students were an integral part of the program, they were asked to serve as facilitators in the discussions, thus making the week of prayer not just *for* them but also *by* them.

Indeed, there is no limit to planning and creating engaging online devotionals. As Adventist educators teaching in online settings, creating a learning environment that "brings the student into close relation with the Teacher sent from God"[9] is part of our calling. Creative online devotionals must be Christ-centered. Devotionals in online courses can encourage students to not only share their faith, but also put their beliefs into practice in ways that help them engage in mission. Creative online devotionals should complete and complement the lesson plan in an intentional, integrated way. Varied activities designed to create excitement and engagement students will enrich the worship experience and help build and strengthen interaction in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. ✐

This article has been peer reviewed.

Leni T. Casimiro, PhD, *is the Director of AIIAS Online at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in Silang, Cavite, Philippines. With more than 16 years of experience in the field of online education, Dr. Casimiro has done extensive research in designing online courses, with specific emphasis on faith integration and mission-oriented course designs, student engagement, online teaching strategies, quality standards, and learning analytics. She also serves as Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Online Learning at AIIAS.*

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1. Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1913), 422.

2. _____, *Child Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954), 293.

3. 2 Corinthians 10:5 NKJV. New King James Version (NKJV). Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

4. Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing, 1977), 2:441.

5. _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students,* 452.

6. _____, *Signs of the Times* (August 26, 1886): par. 6.

7. _____, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 148.

8. All names, photos, testimonies, and images used with permission.

9. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality,* 2:447.

Sharon Aka

Adventist Learning Community Announces
Eight Health Courses

L iving healthfully is an essential component of the Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle. The health message, comprised of principles of healthful living, is core to the church's mission. The Adventist Learning Community now offers eight **free** health and wellness courses that cover a wide range of topics. Provided by Dr. Peter Landless and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Health Ministries Department, these courses can be used by educators and community leaders in a variety of settings: junior high and high school health and physical-education classrooms, the fitness or wellness university classroom, community-services health-education events, mission trip preparedness or attendee education, health expos, in small groups, and in health-evangelism efforts.

Seven of the courses are voice-over PowerPoint presentations. Within each learning module of the course, the learner will view the PowerPoint presentation, read the module learning outcomes and Website information, download resources or participate in additional learning activities, and complete the short quiz. Each course also includes an instructor's guide. A completion certificate will be generated once the learner has finished all the course activities.

The book-review course is set up in learning modules based on the 12 chapters of the book *Health and Wellness: Secrets That Will Change Your Life* by Dr. Peter Landless and Pastor Mark Finley. This book can be obtained as a free downloadable app for iPhone or Android. Each learning module contains Webpage information, desired learning outcomes, several short videos expanding on chapter content, application learning activities, and a quiz. A completion certificate will be generated once the

learner has finished all of the course activities.

Course Descriptions

1. ***Heart Health*** *With Dr. Peter Landless: https://www.*adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/137

Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in the developed world, and its incidence is rising in developing countries. Despite media attention to heart disease, many people remain unaware of the risk factors. This eight-session course, written by a cardiac specialist, covers the most important topics in cardiovascular health and heart-healthy living. [0.8 CEU]

2. ***Birth Companions*** *With Drs. Allan Handysides and Peter Landless:* https://www.adventistlearning community.com/courses/133

The ***Birth Companions*** course is an 11-module course designed to train caring individuals how to mentor, advocate for, and support the mother-to-be during pregnancy and after giving birth to a child. While focused on the adult learner, this course offers the school-age learner very specific information about conception, pregnancy, the birthing process, birth control, and having a new baby. [1 CEU]

3. ***CELEBRATIONS*** *With Dr. Peter Landless:* https://www.adventist learningcommunity.com/courses/134

The *CELEBRATIONS* course is a 12-module course on the 12 healthful-living principles. CELEBRATIONS is an acronym for *Choices, Exercise, Liquids, Environment, Belief, Rest, Air, Temperance, Integrity, Optimism, Nutrition*, and *Social Support*. This course will help learners utilize a wholistic approach to improve their own health. The *CELEBRATIONS* content for children is posted with this course as an additional resource. [1.2 CEU]

4. ***Fitness*** *With Dr. Peter Landless and Jonathan Duffy:* https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/136

Exercise benefits not only physical health, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It is the single best remedy for improving mood, memory, and learning, according to a recent Harvard Medical School study. The eight-session Fitness curriculum covers the benefits of exercise and guides participants as they develop a personal program of regular and satisfying physical activity. [0.8 CEU]

5. ***Community Health, Diseases*** *With Dr. Peter Landless:* https://www. adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/140

This course is one of three courses focused on community health. The 12-module course explores common and transmittable diseases. This course will help participants become knowledgeable about numerous diseases. It provides practical disease recognition criteria, disease transmission information, prevention guidelines, and health-education information. [1 CEU]

6. ***Community Health, Remedies*** *With Dr. Peter Landless:* https://www. adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/142

A three-module course, *Community Health, Remedies* focuses on the following remedy areas: using charcoal, recognizing and treating a

fever, and water treatments. This course will help participants improve their knowledge of natural remedies and treatment strategies. [0.3 CEU]

7. ***Community Health, Healthy Lifestyle*** *With Dr. Peter Landless:* https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/141

The *Community Health, Healthy Lifestyle* course contains 12 modules on healthful living principles. Self-care best practices, substance-abuse information, and family-planning strategies are presented. This course will help participants practice a healthy lifestyle, provide critical information about substance abuse, and lastly, help learners identify the types of family-planning choices that best fit their needs. [1.2 CEU]

Book Review Course Description

Health & Wellness Book Review, Peter Landless and Mark Finley, *Health and Wellness: Secrets That Will Change Your Life* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2014). https://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/courses/151

This book-review course examines how to optimize physical, mental, social, and spiritual health within the framework of the uniquely Adventist health message. Participants will read the FREE downloadable book, watch the short videos in each module, read Webpage content, complete all corresponding module learning activities, and take the module quizzes. By the end of this course, participants will be able to apply biblical and healthful lifestyle practices to their daily activities. [1 CEU] ✐

Sharon Aka, MSN, RN, *is Associate Director of the Adventist Learning Community (ALC) located in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. ALC, an initiative of the North American Division, is an online resource designed to provide professional development and continuing education for ministerial and educational professionals within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. ALC also provides local church communities with access to Adventist-produced content and resources. For more information, visit http://www.adventistlearningcommunity.com/.*

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John Wesley Taylor V

Teaching the Bible Class

Paul wrote to Timothy, who was serving as a teacher[1] and spiritual leader in Ephesus: "God has breathed life into all Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a servant of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing" (NIrV).[2]

Within this framework, Ellen White wrote: "Teachers should constantly seek for improved methods. The teaching of the Bible should have our freshest thought, our best methods, and our most earnest effort."[3]

What strategies can teachers utilize to make Bible classes[4] more effective and enjoyable? Here are some ideas to try:

Tell. Don't just read. Teaching is most effective when it comes from the heart. Before teaching the lesson, look over the major points to be addressed, and try to keep these in mind. Then tell the story or present

the topic in your own words. The result will be much more interesting for your students; and its effect on their lives, more lasting.

Listen. Don't always talk. As teachers, we are usually quite good at talking. But we need to be even better listeners. So when teaching the Bible class, remember that communication with students must be a two-way interaction. While there will be many wonderful opportunities to share your own ideas and concepts, it is also important to encourage students to share their own experiences, questions, and concerns. Engage them in the conversation. Be open to their ideas and opinions.

Ask thought-provoking questions. Many times, we tend to ask only factual questions, such as: How many days did the Israelites march around Jericho? What happened to Lot's wife? Which three disciples witnessed the Transfiguration? While a few factual questions may be appropriate from time to time, it is more important to ask your students questions that will stimulate deep thinking and personal insight. Here are some examples:

• Why do you think that Jesus sent out His disciples two by two?

• What are some ways in which you could share God's love with others?

• How would you reply if someone urged you to smoke?

• What is the first thing you will want to do when you arrive in heaven?

Discuss issues. The Bible class, above all others, should be made relevant to the student's life. One way in which this can be accomplished is through a candid discussion of real-life issues and problems that the students face, and which are related to the unit that they are studying. Another way is to explore together a topic's importance and meaning—its potential application, implications, and ramifications. Be careful, however, not to monopolize the discus-

A good way to encourage students to become actively involved in the Bible class is to plan activities in which they will work together in small groups, perhaps of around three to five students. The groups should be given a specific task and a time limit (such as: five minutes to come up with three reasons why the disciples wanted Jesus to be an earthly king, or 20 minutes to produce a time chart of the lives of the patriarchs before the Flood).

During this time, circulate among the groups, providing encouragement, feedback, and recognition. After engaging in the activity, the groups should report back to the class and share their ideas, insights, or products.

sion. Rather, encourage students to think through the issue or problem, and to express their own insights, feelings, and convictions.

Organize small-group activities. A good way to encourage students to become actively involved in the Bible class is to plan activities in which they will work together in small groups, perhaps of around three to five students. The groups should be given a specific task and a time limit (such as: five minutes to come up with three reasons why the disciples wanted Jesus to be an earthly king, or 20 minutes to produce a time chart of the lives of the patriarchs before the Flood). During this time, circulate among the

groups, providing encouragement, feedback, and recognition. After engaging in the activity, the groups should report back to the class and share their ideas, insights, or products. Perhaps it would be well to note that these activities should be structured in a cooperative, supportive way, thus minimizing rivalry and unhealthful competition.

Illustrate using examples. A new concept is better understood if examples and illustrations are provided. Furthermore, the learning experience itself becomes more enjoyable. So take a moment before teaching a les-

son to think of an example that illustrates the point to be made. These illustrations may be based on stories that you have heard or read, on an historical incident or current new item, or on your own life and experiences. It is also appropriate, from time to time, to ask your students to share relevant examples from their lives, perhaps an answer to prayer or an experience that they may have had similar to that of the Bible character they are studying.

Utilize visual supports. Students remember things better when they can see them as well as hear them. Jesus, of course, recognized this fact and frequently employed visual lessons—a coin, a lily, a farmer, a fig tree, and a little child, for example. As each lesson is taught, try to incorporate some visual aspects.[5] This may be in the form of a picture, a map, or an actual object, such as a stone or a net. It may also include the effective use of the board—to draw a diagram, to jot down key words, or to show the relationship between concepts. So think creatively and visualize!

Orchestrate role-play. Students can learn important skills and gain deeper insights through role-play. In this strategy, briefly describe a Bible story or a real-life situation. Then select certain students for specific roles, while other students serve as the observers. As there is not a set script, the students must come up with their own words and reactions. After the role-play, discuss the enactment, endeavoring to identify important insights gained.

Maximize use of music. Hymns and songs, related to the topics under consideration, are powerful means of impressing God's truth on the minds of students. So, sing often. On occasion, ask your students to share a favorite song with the rest of the class or with others beyond your classroom. Music can also be used to help your students memorize verses from the Bible. This is, in fact, one of the best ways to commit Scripture to memory. If you do not know a song for an important biblical passage, perhaps you or one of your students can create one!

Promote outreach activities. Regardless of the particular unit or topic, it is important for students to reach out to others through witnessing and acts of selfless service. Assign your students specific outreach projects related to the topic they are studying. This may be as simple as asking each student to find a way to make someone happy, or it may involve a long-term project, such as beautifying a part of your town. In any case, the students should bring back a report to the class as to their experience and what they have learned. Better yet, you can also be a part of the project, so it becomes a shared experience.

There are, of course, other teaching strategies, such as problem-solving, demonstrations, brainstorming, and case studies, among others, which can be useful tools to help your students learn. The important thing is for teachers to use a variety of teaching strategies. Even the most interesting approach will lose its effectiveness if used every day. So, expand your repertoire of teaching strategies. Add to your collection of instructional tools. Venture out and discover a new horizon!

Ultimately, however, there is one strategy that is more effective than any other: Your own life. The model is simply the most powerful method. Your lifestyle, your attributes, your actions—all of these convey a powerful message, one that speaks to your students about God much more eloquently than words alone. So how can you best represent Jesus? By His Spirit filling your life. Then you will be what you want your students to become. Teaching a religion course is indeed a high calling, but He who calls you will also enable. Through His grace, you will be a channel of His truth and love. ✐

John Wesley Taylor V, PhD, EdD, *serves as an Associate Director of Education at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A., and has taught in elementary through graduate education in a number of different countries. He may be reached at taylorjw@gc.adventist.org.*

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1. 1 Timothy 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 2:2, 15.
2. 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, NIrV. The Holy Bible, New International Reader's Version. Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998 by International Bible Society. The term *servant* rather than *man* is used by the NIV. The Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 186.
4. The term "Bible class" refers to a course taken by all students that focuses on the study of the Bible. In reality, this course might perhaps be better designated as a "religion class," given that all courses should be founded upon God's Word, with a biblical worldview permeating each unit and topic. As Ellen White observes, "The Bible must be made the foundation for all study" (*Fundamentals of Christian Education* [Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing, 1923], 451).
5. Writing to her son, Edson, who was teaching the children of recently liberated slaves in the Southern states, Ellen White stated: "Edson, your method of instructing from pictures for the Southern school is an excellent idea. These pictures can be got up as cheaply as possible. You might talk till you were weary to get ideas into the heads of the . . . children, but give them a similitude, an object, and the lesson becomes stamped upon the mind never to be forgotten" (Letter 136a, 1898, 9). On another occasion, in the context of teaching the Bible, Ellen White wrote, "The use of object lessons, blackboards, maps, and pictures, will be an aid in explaining these lessons, and fixing them in the memory" (*Education*, 186).
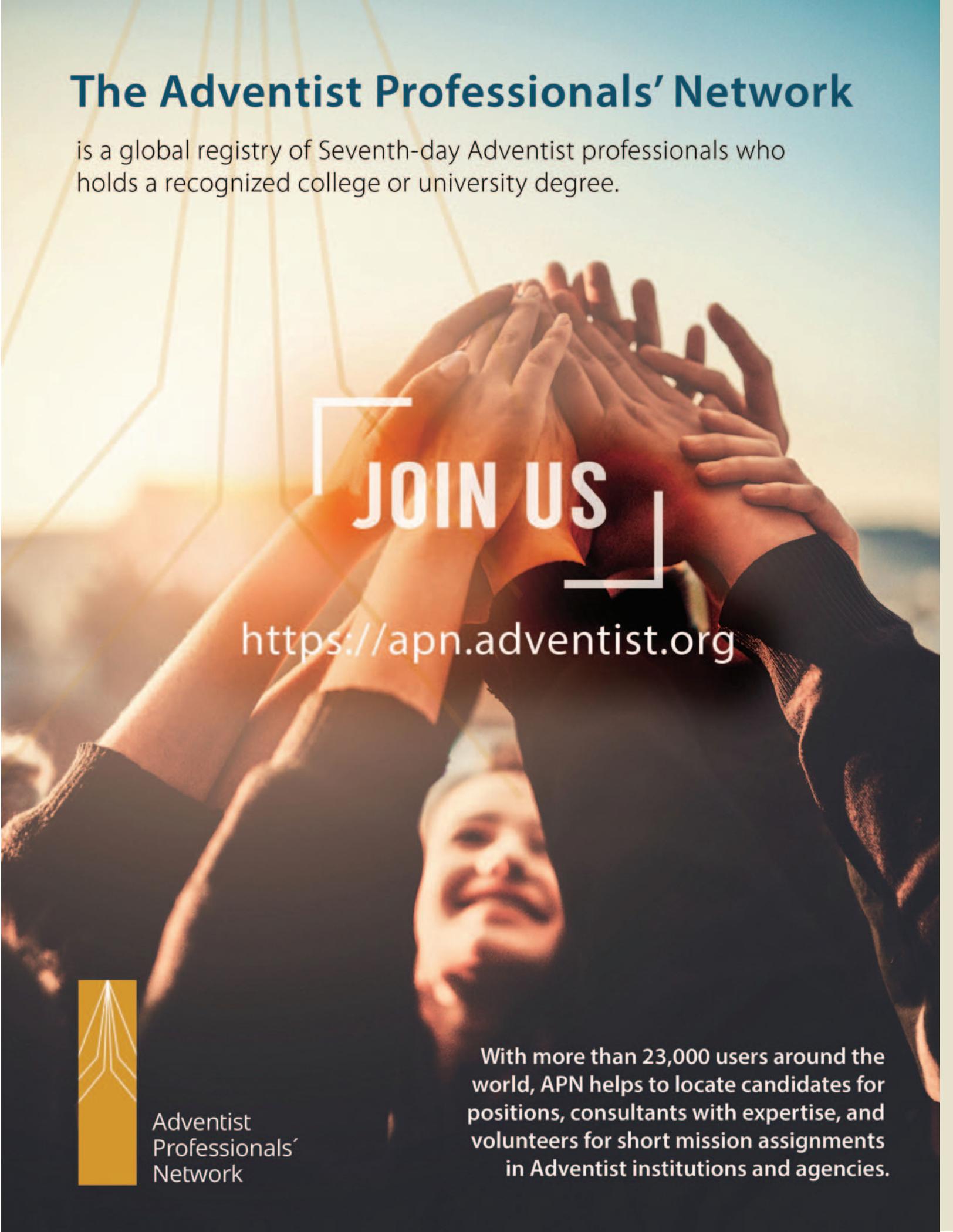
other private institutions they are attending.

Our educational system's primary reason for existence is to further the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church by using education as evangelism for growing faith in our students. Online education provides a wider audience with access to not only a quality education, but also access to the mission and faith-building experiences of Adventist education.

However, as we continue to explore ways and means for offering online education, we cannot be content with just figuring out how to post courses online. The experience of Adventist education encompasses much more than the course content.

"True education means more than the pursual of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come."[2]

We must continue to experiment with and develop ways to prepare students for "the joy of service in this world," even within the realm of online education. As online teachers, we need to ensure we keep in mind the "harmonious development" of the whole person. We must think of our online students as real people, interacting with them and building relationships with strategies such as those shared by Adam Fenner, whose article on building relationships for ministry with online students appears in this issue.

So, in this special issue of THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION, which focuses on online education, we have taken a deliberate approach to the topic. Within the church, we have vibrant and growing online programs internationally, and we wanted to feature the faculty and views from a perspective broader than only North American institutions. We hope you will enjoy the variety of authors and viewpoints shared from our international schools involved in online learning.

In addition, we took a very practical, teacher-focused approach. You'll read about approaches to equipping and supporting online faculty (La Ronda Forsey), strategies for ensuring a faith presence in online courses and developing creative devotionals (Leni T. Casimiro), initiatives to support retention of at-risk students (Anthony Williams, Maria Northcote, Peter Kilgour, and Ben Stewart), and effective ways of building relationships for ministry to online students (Adam Fenner).

The April-May 2018 issue will feature four articles that discuss strategies for mentoring students (Lorena Neria de Girarte), creating authentic assessments (Evelyn Almocera), assessing language skills online (Arceli Rosario, Irene Rivera, and Sheri Joy Namanya), and electronic journaling (Prema Gaikwad). Together, this collection of concrete strategies will provide resources to schools, colleges, and universities offering blended and online learning in Adventist education.

Janine Monica Lim, PhD, *is the Associate Dean for Online Higher Education in the School of Distance Education and Associate Professor of Educational Technology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. In her current role, Dr. Lim is responsible for more than 200 online courses, faculty training, and systems that support online learning. She oversees the faculty and courses of the Consortium of Adventist Colleges and Universities, and since 2015 has served on the board of the United States Distance Learning Association. Prior to her tenure at Andrews University, Dr. Lim coordinated distance education for 22 K-12 school districts in southwest Michigan, initiated international videoconferencing projects such as Read Around the Planet and MysteryQuest, co-founded TWICE (Michigan's K-12 Videoconferencing Organization), taught graduate courses in educational technology, and published and presented in her field. She also authored a column on technology for the* JOURNAL.

As coordinator of this issue, Dr. Lim assisted in all aspects of its development, from identifying topics, authors, and reviewers to providing input on manuscripts and answering questions. The Editorial Staff of the JOURNAL *express heartfelt appreciation for her assistance throughout the planning and production of this issue.*

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Adult learners prefer the flexibility offered by online course environment, which allows them to better manage their time. For more, see *Online College Students 2016: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences:* http://www.learninghouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/OCS-2016-Report.pdf.

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 13.

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