

EMS Occasional Bulletin
Vol. 28 No. 1 (January 2015)
Timothy Bahula
Curriculum Design Officer
Horizon International Schools

RE-ENVISIONING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION 2.0: WHAT IS THE ROLE FOR SILICON VALLEY?¹

The world was much different when Allan Cuthbert left the United States in 1980 for his first term of service as a church planter in São Paulo, Brazil. Just three years earlier, in 1977, the Apple II computer and the Hayes 80-130A modem² became commercially available. The Apple II would propel the personal computer revolution, and the Hayes modem gave rise to Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), a populist precursor to the internet. Meanwhile, the U.S. military and university research institutes had been developing ARPANET, a fault-proof, disaster-resistant data communications network. By 1980, there were 100 computers connected to it. The TCP/IP communications protocol that transports data on today's internet wouldn't be formally adopted until 1983. Incorporating TCP/IP into the open-source UNIX operating system accelerated the growth the early internet. The exponential growth and the pervasive reach of the internet could hardly be imagined.³

Fast-forward less than 35 years and Allan Cuthbert is now President of Horizon International Schools, a provider of online theological education. By now the internet has radically transformed many aspects of life. With over 3 billion people having access, worldwide internet penetration has reached 40%. An estimated 1 billion websites are available. Transfer speeds have also increased dramatically. Instead of measuring speed in bits per second, broadband transfer speeds are measured in millions of bits per second. Not much more than a decade ago, broadband was restricted to fixed wire connections.⁴ However, mobile broadband is now widely available, and use is growing rapidly. The growth continues to be fastest in developing countries. The internet revolution is clearly not over.⁵

An advertising campaign by IBM in 1997 raised an essential question for theological educators. As an executive reads a newspaper, he states, “It says here, ‘The internet is the future of business.’ ... We have to be on the internet.” When his colleague asks, “Why?”, the executive replies, “Doesn’t say.”⁶ Seventeen years later, the internet is no longer “the future.” It is quite clearly the present. Even as many schools attempt to get theological education “on the internet,” too often the unanswered question is “Why?” This article explores the role of the internet for theological education, particularly looking at the ministry of Horizon International Schools.

A Pragmatic Necessity?

Research data from sources such as *Operation World* suggests that the church has done a comparatively good job of evangelism and church planting. Mandryk comments, “The post-WWII surge of evangelical missions was an astonishing success story.”⁷ The church seems not to have done as well at training leaders. While the exact need worldwide is hard to quantify, indicators point to a great need in most regions. Mandryk comments, “Leadership development is the crucial bottleneck to church growth.”⁸

The observations gathered as part of the *Global Survey on Theological Education* were similar. The 1,650 survey respondents indicated, “There are not enough theological schools in the regions of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly (Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia).”⁹ Regarding the future of theological education, the report noted this response as typical: “They don’t want to be taught in a ‘modern’ context (classrooms, lectures, paper tests, etc.). Teachers need to think ‘post-modern’—having students work collaboratively, doing team research projects, authoring digital media content, etc.”¹⁰

The need for reform and alternative models of theological education has been discussed and written about at length. In the last decades, geographical descriptors have sometimes been used as a kind of shorthand to describe models. David Kelsey used this method when he contrasted Athens (the

classical model of the academy) and Berlin (the vocational model of the university) as the dominant competing models.¹¹ After Kelsey compared theological schools to “crossroads hamlets,”¹² others have multiplied the metaphors. Darren Cronshaw, building on the work of Robert Banks,¹³ recently presented a typology of theological education models including Athens, Berlin, Geneva (the confessional model of the seminary), Auburn (the contextual model of the parish), and New Delhi (the spiritual model of the ashram), with all of these encircling Jerusalem (the missional model of the community).¹⁴ What each of these places (and the approaches to theological education they represent) have in common is that the high-tech world of Silicon Valley is invading them. Determining the role that Silicon Valley should play in theological education is an important question.

A Theological Understanding of Technology

The church faces a significant challenge when confronted by new technologies and the new opportunities they create. There is a lack of a robust theological understanding of technology. It is easier to either cling to the old or to utilize the new than it is to think theologically about things that could not have been imagined 200 years ago, let alone 2000 years ago when the Scriptures were written. Ongoing critical reflection on the use and effects of technology is prudent before wholeheartedly adopting or rejecting new tools or activities. In the early days, it is difficult to use new technology and to realize the claims made for benefits it may bring. It is far more difficult to determine how the technology will subsequently be used and what unintended consequences could surface.

A significant challenge arises from a narrow understanding of technology. In common parlance, “technology” is often used to refer to new electronic gadgets with microprocessors, sensors, LED displays, and the like.¹⁵ John Dyer, writing with the perspective of a Christian, defines technology as “the human activity of using tools to transform God’s creation for practical purposes.”¹⁶ The starting point for this understanding of technology is that humanity was created to reflect the image of God, the creator (Gen. 1:26-27), and that the first man was charged with cultivating the Garden (Gen. 2:15). Dyer traces

this understanding of technology through the Fall and its consequences, where human activity uses tools in rebellion against God, and through various redemptive acts of God, where human activity uses tools to accomplish God's purposes, leading to the work of Christ on the cross, where human activity used tools both in rebellion against God and to accomplish God's purposes, setting the stage for the ultimate restoration. Surprisingly, restoration is not a return to Eden, but rather life on a new earth and in the heavenly city of God, cleansed from evil, and apparently full of technology (Rev. 21:21).

In Dyer's definition of technology, tools include objects from wrenches to smartphones. In education, obvious tools include things from textbooks to data projectors. It is easy to take for granted common tools that were inconceivable centuries ago and to overlook how those tools have altered what we do. Notice, then, that the definition speaks of activity, not simply tools. This serves as a reminder that, through the action of using tools, body and mind are shaped and redefined. However, just as activities are not done in isolation, neither do changes affect only the individual. As a result, the activity of using tools also alters organizations, communities, and societies. John Culkin wrote, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us."¹⁷ Technology is transformative, not merely substituting one tool or activity with another, but necessarily recreating what is done and how it is done. The tools provided by Silicon Valley hold the potential to transform long-established forms of theological education, such as the traditional classroom and distance education, as well the power to enable new forms.

The Ministry of Horizon International Schools

Horizon International Schools is working to re-envision theological education using the internet. What is now Horizon International Schools developed out of the vision of Dr. John White Jr., a consultant with the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism. Allan Cuthbert, formerly a church planter in São Paulo, Brazil, and now Horizon's president, worked with Dr. White on this project from its inception in 1996. The original idea was to facilitate synergy between South American theological

schools for the purpose of sharing resources. Over the years, this original vision has grown and been refined.

Today the stated mission of Horizon is to partner with national theological schools in equipping ministry leaders through distance learning, in their own language and culture, for global service. That mission is molded by five core values that shape our theory and our practice. As a Christian organization, we place a high priority on biblical integrity. As an educational institution, we value academic excellence. As members of Christ's church, we view cultural engagement as critically important and global partnerships as an essential aspect of our mission. Finally, recognizing the great need throughout the world and the limited resources available, we are committed to providing accessible training.

Horizon serves national theological schools, partnering with them to develop culturally-suitable and sustainable models for online theological education. We work with them in three key areas: curriculum, faculty, and administrative development. In the area of curriculum development, Horizon subscribes to the growing body of research arguing that excellence in education extends beyond the transmission of specific codices of information to the development and demonstration of significant understandings. This meaning-making activity is essential to the successful transfer of knowledge and skills from the educational environment to the real world of ministry. Thus, Horizon works closely with affiliate schools to identify competencies necessary for effective ministry in their local context. These competencies then guide program and course development toward specific educational outcomes.

The second area of emphasis is faculty development. Horizon recognizes that, in addition to subject matter expertise, faculty members need to develop educational expertise. Pedagogical (and in most cases andragogical) understanding of the nature of teaching and learning is an essential basis for effective theological education, whether it be in a traditional classroom or the online environment. Knowledge of content is irrelevant if the teacher fails to engage the learner in an educational process that leads to authentic learning. In addition to general educational theory and skills, we provide affiliate

schools with specific training for online education. We begin by training course facilitators to use materials in their language that have been developed by Horizon. These courses are easily customized to suit the specific educational context of the affiliate school. Further, we have begun to work alongside faculty members from affiliate schools to design, develop, implement, and evaluate their own online courses tailored to their unique situation. As a part of our service to them, Horizon offers our affiliate schools the use of our learning management system for delivering online courses, as well as tracking student work and grades for its campus-based courses. We provide this service using Moodle, the multi-lingual open-source learning management system, currently hosted on virtual servers collocated in four dispersed geographic regions.

The final area, focussing on administrative development, is perhaps the most crucial. Most of the administrators at schools affiliated with Horizon were trained to be pastors. Many have no prior experience in educational administration and have been given little or no training. Providing mentors and training for these leaders will be conducive to the long-term success of the mission of these schools. Horizon helps them identify and implement administrative models that are appropriate to their culture. Further, through these appropriate administrative models, we promote the sustainable development of their schools. Through our partnerships, we build administrative capacity by promoting key competencies identified for leaders of theological schools: team-building, faculty relations, financial management, institutional advancement, vision.¹⁸ Better-equipped administrators will yield stronger schools which, in turn, will promote better learning.

The Promise and Peril of Horizon's Work

Having discussed the transformative nature of technology and described the work of Horizon, it will be helpful to reflect on the potential of online theological education in general and of Horizon's work in particular. Using the tools of Silicon Valley will have both positive and negative effects on theological education. Some of these will be intentional and obvious; many will be unintentional and not

immediately apparent. While the former are easier to discuss, the latter must not be ignored, and critical reflection will be necessary to uncover them.

Online theological education provides significant benefits for training leaders for the church around the world. Three of these are an increased ability to access theological education, an enhancement of interaction between teachers and learners, and a retrieval of the community as the locus for theological education.

The first significant benefit is the enhanced accessibility of theological education, both for students and professors. This is possible because the internet minimizes the effects of distance on communication. A great number of potential students around the world lack access to traditional classrooms for a wide variety of reasons. Online courses enable more of them to access the training that they need and desire. Recently in Sydney, Australia, none of the students enrolled in an online course through a Horizon affiliate school had ever taken a class on campus. Also, a student living in Angola is now being trained through an affiliate seminary in São Paulo, Brazil. Other students at the same seminary have eliminated their two-hour commute to classes from the other side of that vast metropolis.

Online theological education also enhances the accessibility of qualified teachers. While the Global North has an abundance of these, there is a scarcity in many areas of the Global South where the church is growing fastest. Several years ago, an effective pastoral trainer was forced to leave Venezuela, where he was teaching in a Bible institute. Undeterred, he began to teach many of the same students using Horizon's platform from his new home in Costa Rica. Soon he was training pastors in over a dozen different Latin American countries. After moving again, this time because of health issues, he continues to train pastors throughout Latin America from his home in Indiana well into his retirement years. However, more than allowing teachers to continue their ministry despite changing circumstances, online courses permit schools to access gifted teachers who would otherwise be inaccessible. Last winter in

Michigan, on a day that the director of a Bengali mission was snowed in, he opened an online course for his students who were all in Bangladesh. He is using Horizon courses to train leaders of discipleship groups that he believes will soon grow into churches.

A second significant benefit of online theological education is an opportunity for increased interaction between teachers and learners. This opportunity is created because internet alters the effects of time on communication. Some of the courses delivered on Horizon's platform require synchronous communication, where multiple people are online simultaneously about the course material. This approach uses chats or audio- or video-conferencing to substitute for interactions that happen in a classroom. All of the courses delivered on Horizon's platform require asynchronous communication, which occurs over longer periods of time using written or recorded lectures as well as discussion boards. This type of communication transforms interaction in theological education. Discussions are no longer dominated by quick-witted and assertive students since all are required to participate and have the necessary time to formulate their contribution. Students pause and replay (or read and reread) lecture segments as needed; they reflect on discussion questions before responding; and they research additional information when required, all of which serve to improve the quality and quantity of interactions. In many Horizon forum discussions, a flourishing of student participation has been observed.

A third significant benefit, and perhaps the most profound, is that online theological education retrieves the student's community as the locus of theological education. With this alternative approach, the context of ministry also becomes the context of education. When church leaders leave their ministry for training, many do not return because of better opportunities elsewhere. If they do return, they are no longer cultural insiders and can face challenges reintegrating. Further, theological education in the student's community enables training to become "just-in-time" rather than "just-in-case." The relevance of materials discussed can be immediately put to the test. During a recent Disciple Making and

Evangelism course, a student shared about the usefulness of the concepts in witnessing to his sister. Finally, with learning occurring in the student's community, contextualization of theology and practice are facilitated. Online theological education enables theological reflection in the context of existing community encouraging "self-theologizing" activity (Hiebert's fourth "self" criteria). The network effect that online theological education fosters will also spur the globalizing of theology.

A variety of negative aspects could be discussed; however, attention will be focused on one that seems to have the most significant theological import. At its worst, online theological education can revert into a disembodied transfer of theological knowledge from one isolated individual to other isolated individuals, devoid of skill development and spiritual formation. It is hard not to acknowledge the many benefits of embodied communication. The pattern of divine revelation in the incarnation (Heb. 1:1-3) sets a high standard for all other communication. Several biblical authors indicate their preference for face-to-face communication (Phil. 2:23-24; 2 John 1:12; 3 John 1:13-14). There is a legitimate concern regarding whether authentic relationships and a learning community can be forged and sustained through the medium of the internet. Jason Baker, in his evaluation of online theological education, states bluntly that the form must be rejected if those connections cannot be established.¹⁹ Significant study has been undertaken to determine the nature and extent of online relationships and community in online education in general, often making comparisons to traditional classrooms. While those things can be debated, Baker aptly connects this concern about online community to the benefit of contextualized learning:

By arranging mentoring relationships, experiential learning activities, internships, professional networking events, and similar experiences, an institution can increase the online learners' local sense of community. While this may seem to be an inverted approach to fostering community, it has the potential of putting the institution in a position to positively affect the students' larger culture, which is not inconsistent with a Christian philosophy of education.²⁰

While negative aspects of online theological education will always be present, this kind of awareness enables theological educators to mitigate their effects.

Concluding Recommendation

This article has sought to provoke a discussion of the question “Why must theological education be on the internet?” by exploring the role of Silicon Valley and by considering the ministry of Horizon International Schools. If success has been achieved, consider extending the discussion. One possibility is to utilize the theological technology tetrad and accompanying questions developed by John Dyer.²¹ He develops this framework for thinking about technology by tracing the movement of the biblical story from creation, through fall and redemption, to restoration. The provocative questions he raises ought to be discussed in groups to improve awareness of the positive and negative aspects of the technology of online theological education.

¹ Or Silicon Wadi, Silicon Oasis, Silicon Gulf, Silicon Fen, Silicon Glen, or Silicon Gorge depending on one’s location, although none have had as profound of an effect on the world as Silicon Valley. See “List of Technology Centers,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, December 6, 2014, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_technology_centers.

² Modem is a short form for modulator-demodulator. This is a device used to convert bits into analog signals on one end and vice versa on the other to transmit data over an analog network, such as the telephone system. Although modems may soon be forgotten, they were an essential part of the spread of the internet. However, with a transfer speed of 300 bits per second it was a slow start. At that speed, it would take almost 5 seconds just to transfer a 140-character Twitter message and much longer to transfer longer forms of text never mind pictures, graphics, audio, or video.

³ The origins of the internet continue to be debated. For one look at the history, see John Naughton, *A Brief History of the Future: The Origins of the Internet*, 1999.

⁴ Broadband refers to high-speed, high-capacity stable connections to the internet. Initially, these connections were over a telephone line as providers found ever faster ways of transmitting data over copper wires.

⁵ See, for example, the prognostications of Google’s Eric Schmidt in Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Transforming Nations, Businesses, and Our Lives* (Vintage Books, 2014).

⁶ Decade-old commercials, *IBM Internet Hype (commercial, 1997)*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvDck3pY4qo>.

⁷ *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide To Every Nation*, Seventh Edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17. Mandryk returns to the theme again and again as countries are discussed. In the Anhui province of China, “Training is a serious challenge in such a fast-multiplying church. The [Three-Self Patriotic Movement] alone has nearly 5,000 meeting points, but less than 100 ordained pastors” (*Ibid.*, 229). In Ukraine, “Leadership is probably the primary church need.... Twenty years of sustained growth created thousands of new congregations requiring leadership formation” (*Ibid.*, 846). In India, “New, creative ways for multiplying leaders must be developed. The need is greater than what residential institutions can produce, and 90% of pastors lack access to adequate theological training” (*Ibid.*, 413).

⁹ David Esterline et al., *Global Survey on Theological Education 2011-2013: Summary of Main Findings* (Busan: World Council of Churches, 2013), 2, http://www.globethics.net/documents/2781038/15101992/GlobalSurveyReport_130918.pdf.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ See David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) and then further developed in David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Alban Books Limited, 1993).

¹² Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, 30.

¹³ Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

¹⁴ Cronshaw, Darren, "Reenvisioning Theological Education and Missional Spirituality," *The Journal of Adult Theological Education* 9, no. 1 (2012): 13.

¹⁵ Douglas Adams poignantly summarized the common understanding of technology. Any technology that exists when you are born "is just normal," any technology invented between birth and age 30 "is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it," and any technology invented after age 30 "is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really." Douglas Adams, "How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Internet," *DouglasAdams.com*, September 1, 1999, <http://www.douglasadams.com/dna/19990901-00-a.html>.

¹⁶ Dyer illustrates his definition by applying it to a simple tool, a shovel. "The 'activity' that we do with a shovel is moving dirt—literally an act of transforming God's creation. But typically people don't dig just for the sake of digging. They dig for some bigger purpose, or a 'practical end,' such as building a house or burying a treasure." John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), location 1102.

¹⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, location 564.

¹⁸ Wheeler, Barbara G., "Effective Presidents: New Research Reveals the Marks of Strong Leaders," *In Trust*, Summer 2010.

¹⁹ John Mark Reynolds et al., *The New Media Frontier: Blogging, Vlogging, and Podcasting for Christ* (Crossway Books, 2008), location 3103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, location 3143.

²¹ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, location 3136.