ACU Connected: Groundbreaking initiative reshapes education at Abilene Christian University

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Abilene Christian University (ACU; http://www.acu.edu/) is emblematic of the intersection of religion and new media. Like countless Protestant churches across the country, this Churches of Christ-affiliated institution maintains a vibrant religious commitment “to educate students for Christian service and leadership throughout the world” (http://www.acu.edu/aboutacu/profile.html). The university boasts a faculty of 249 full-time members, all confessing Christians who are mostly from the Churches of Christ family.

This religious educational institution innovatively employs new media to practice and facilitate their mission. In the fall of 2008, the school launched ACU Connected (http://www.acu.edu/technology/mobilelearning/), a mobile learning initiative. The program has as its foundation the belief that “humans learn best when they are in community—collaborating with others in a learning environment without boundaries” (http://www.acu.edu/aboutacu/profile.html). To this end, the school has equipped faculty and all entering freshmen students with the choice of an iPhone or iPod Touch mobile device. This provision was aimed at creating “a profoundly connected learning experience” across the boundaries of time and space (http://www.acu.edu/technology/mobilelearning/vision/index.html).

The infrastructure (especially the myACU mobile app: http://up00.acu.edu/web/guest/home) and training conducted by the savvy staff of the Adams Center for Teaching Excellence (http://www.acu.edu/academics/adamscenter/) supports the initiative and enables faculty and students to use their mobile devices to engage in cutting edge pedagogy and learning for the twenty-first century.

Faculty and students use their mobile devices to access various educational and programmatic materials such as course records, assignments, deadlines, readings, university social and sporting events, as well as financial information and obligations. For example, faculty members use their devices to take attendance. The myACU app displays pictures of students enrolled in a course and allows professors to mark them present, absence, or even tardy. Later an automated message is sent to students informing them of their status for the day. These daily records are compiled, making it easier for faculty to tally attendance records as well as match student faces with names. All from the ease and convenience of the instructor’s mobile device.
Mobile devices also serve as “clickers” to allow students to use their mobile devices during class to respond to quiz questions, posit questions during and after classroom lectures, as well as respond to discussion prompts and even polls during class time. This option, according to several students, proves particularly useful when addressing controversial subjects such as evolution, abortion, and homosexuality.

In addition to classroom interactions, mobile devices offer faculty and students multiple venues of engagement outside of the classroom. Faculty and students often use their mobile devices to interact via online discussions, podcasts, Skype, class blogs, classroom chat portals, email, and social networking sites. The school’s million dollar learning studio with its recording studio quality rooms and Hollywood caliber Chroma key compositing studio, or “green screen,” assist in producing top-notch sound and audio production.

Furthermore, several members of the faculty use their mobile devices to assess student work. The feared criticism of the professor’s red pen is disappearing. The recording feature of the iPhone allows faculty members to record verbal messages offering critique, guidance, and correction on student assignments. The ease of accessing student profiles and contact information via the myACU app provides teachers with a quick and seamless way to send these evaluative messages electronically directly to students. Some even embed the audio files as hyperlinks in the content of the paper. In all, the mobile learning initiative is re-shaping how faculty and students engage in the educational process at ACU.

Some may be surprised that an evangelical Christian institution would be on the cutting edge of communication technology. However, contrary to popular depiction, evangelical Christianity has never really been an epicenter of resistance or disdain for modern American culture. Rather, evangelical Christianity has continually been an integral part of modernity in America. This is particularly evident in their trendsetting use of new communication technologies (print, oratory, phonograph, radio, television, Internet, and now mobile technologies) for religious ends.

Evangelical faith communities do not possess exclusive rights to employing emerging communication technologies in the service of religion. However, many of the best-known religious media pioneers in American religious history embraced this faith tradition. Twentieth-century religious media entrepreneurs such as Aimee Semple McPherson, Paul Rader, Kathryn Kuhlman, Charles Fuller, and Marilyn Hickey, to name a few, utilized the emerging new media of their days to facilitate Christian instruction and formation.¹

The application of popular culture in the service of religion has also been a hallmark of American evangelicals. Evangelical groups often modeled their use of new media after popular forms of entertainment. Evangelical preachers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries employed the oratorical skills of the theatre in their delivery. Radio broadcasts mimicked popular serial radio shows. Likewise, religious television bears a resemblance to leading talks shows and late night entertainment. Employment of popular culture typifies evangelical approaches to American mores. Evangelicals refused to retreat from culture like fundamentalists did. Such groups also refused to assimilate and adapt their religious commitments according to
popular culture as in the case of many liberal Protestants. Instead, evangelical faith traditions used emerging communication technologies and popular culture to “in-culturate” their religious proclamations and commitments. This move enabled evangelicals to saturate the marketplace and popular mediums with their messages and mission.

ACU, in many ways, is part of this evangelical religious heritage. The university uses new media and popular culture to communicate and carry out their religious mission. According to a recent Pew Research Center study (http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1572/teens-cell-phones-text-messages), mobile phones are the favored communication hub for the majority of American teens. To this end, ACU Connected uses new communication trends to transmit religious messages and ethos. Dr. Scott Hamm, Director of Mobile Learning Research, aptly states that the mobile learning initiative has made the institution’s educational ethos “part of the ambient noise of everyday life.” In short, ACU Connected enables this religious institution to permeate students’ lives with the educational and religious mission of the institution in an increasingly mobile society. This saturation has become so entrenched in the community that it appears, in many ways, that mobile devices have become a part of the normative educational ethos—chalk and blackboards for the twenty-first century.

The mobile learning initiative has as its goals “to extend or enhance faculty teaching and research, to lead to more engaged and active student learning, to improve campus community and interactions, and, finally, to establish conversations and relationships between ACU and other campuses” (http://www.acu.edu/technology/mobilelearning/vision/index.html). Integrating the use of mobile mediums into the fabric and infrastructure of the university enables leaders to advance these goals in three primary and inter-related ways: pedagogy, educational expectations, and community formation and interaction.

ACU Connected is revising pedagogy. Hamm believes that the rapid changes in communication technologies as well as the increased access to knowledge and information has shifted the role of educators from “prognosticators to interpreters.” He suggests that this reality calls for “technology guides, not sages.” Mobile learning, he continues, has “revisioned the classroom…. The walls of the classroom are coming down and the world is coming in. I think we are moving from an 'anytime, anywhere' environment to an 'all-the-time, everywhere' environment for learning.” It is clear; the use of mobile devices in the classroom constitutes new avenues of information and authority across the divides of time and space.

Subsequently, classroom pedagogy is experiencing significant changes. Faculty still lecture, however, as one student focus group noted, “lectures have been modified” because the learning environment is complemented by the universal mobile access to information. This heightened level of access to knowledge, students say, endows them with a stronger feeling of autonomy in their learning experience. New media allow individuals to shape their own experiences of entertainment and commerce via iTunes, Facebook, MySpace, personalized YouTube channels, and even Amazon shopping preferences. ACU believes that education should also be open to being shaped by individual users. As one staffer from the Adams Center told me, “One size
education fits all’ does not fit well with my idea of the *imago dei*. God has created us in God’s image as individuals. One size does not fit all!”

This approach to education is altering the role of the professor in the classroom. Faculty are increasingly being viewed not as people who encompass the totality of knowledge and expertise but rather as guides who help students discover, interpret, and synthesize multiple streams of knowledge. Students and the world around them, therefore, increasingly participate *with* the teacher in the production of knowledge and research in the educational experience. For the academic year of 2010-2011, 84 percent of faculty reported using their devices frequently in class to facilitate enhanced classroom collaboration. Fifty percent reported that they employed their mobile devices during every class period (http://www.acu.edu/news/2011/110919-mobility-research.html). As faculty use of media devices increases, they will still possess a form of authoritative power for direction, vision, and assessment, however it will be significantly different. The professor will increasingly morph into more of a guide and/or mentor in the pedagogical experience.

In addition to pedagogy, the mobile learning initiative is also altering the expectations held by students and faculty. They expect more from one another. For Hamm, the ability to access an infinite amount of data raises the expectations of students. Vic McCracken, professor of Bible and theology, holds similar sentiments. He says that he expects “more creativity” in his students’ assignments and presentations.

Students also expect more from themselves. One student thinks the normative use of mobile technology at ACU has removed “all excuses” for not completing assignments. The infrastructure of ACU Connected offers students multiple ways to access assignments, due dates, and course materials. Students also expect more from each another. The social reliance on the iPhone means that access to group expectations and obligations are nearly omnipresent.

Such heightened expectations apply to faculty as well. McCracken says that students expect more from teachers in the presentation of classroom materials. One student says plainly, “I expect a lot more from my professors!” For many students, to not engage some form of multi-media presentation communicates that a faculty member is not as relevant in their respective field of expertise and technology. Simply put, as access to information has risen, so too have expectations of the educational experience.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, mobile learning is influencing the formation of communal interaction at ACU. Public commentary and study of new media report a deep concern for the loss of community. Writers and observers wonder if virtual communities such as online religious congregations and distance learning programs will become proxies for physical interactions. The use of new media at ACU, however, actually seems to be promoting physical gathering. Students who matriculated during the advent of the mobile learning initiative reported an increase in group study sessions and gatherings. From 2010 to 2011, 86 percent of students reported improved student-to-student and student-to-teacher collaborations and interactions after employing their mobile devices in the educational process. Mobile technology
and the bevy of social portals allow students to connect with those whom they might not ever physically engage in conversation. These virtual connections often blossom into face-to-face connections. Using the organizational tools of social networking and the myACU app, these relationships often develop into gatherings for meals, study sessions, and group discussions. Even the ubiquity of new media is not a complete proxy for actual physical gathering and contact.

There are several areas of concern that emerged during my study. The educators voiced several moral trepidations. The equity of the program is of major concern. Some students cannot afford the monthly data service charge for the iPhone. The iPod Touch solves this problem but only in part. The device, unlike the iPhone, only has Wi-Fi capability, severely limiting mobile access. The digital world is spiked, not flat.

Several faculty members also voiced concern regarding spiritual formation. Hamm worries that even if the mobile learning initiative is an educational success, it might not be a good tool for spiritual growth and formation. He wonders whether students are only cultivating a practice of consumption and not one of giving and sacrifice. Professors in the religion department wonder if mobile devices are too ubiquitous and perhaps detrimental to students in the long run because mobile devices make it “too easy to check out.” McCracken acknowledges the benefits of the initiative, however he also admits that he is “increasingly ambivalent” toward mobile learning.

Some faculty members also worry about time management. Students say that mobile learning has helped them organize their time and become more efficient. However, the device also presents a multitude of distractions to learning. Sizeable amounts of study time can be drained by one-touch instant access to Facebook, YouTube, and the Internet. Nevertheless, as one student says, “Whether you have an iPhone or not, if you want to be distracted, you will find a way to do it. If it isn’t Facebook, it will be doodling!” The use of new media has not eliminated the same old classroom dilemmas.

Many expressed social and ethical concerns as well. The universal access to mobile technology easily facilitates porous boundaries between faculty and students, which can create opportunities for inappropriate contact and interactions. The Adams Center offers faculty training on appropriate ethical and moral practices for new media users. However, faculty and student apprehension remains. In addition to appropriate interactions, concerns for community abound as well. Most agree that students still gather for educational and social reasons. However, the ability of new media to channel group interactions remains a concern. The Adams Center recognizes that one risk ACU Connected poses for community formation is the possibility that the expanding mobile community will increasingly self-segregate into like-minded communities. Social media have not stifled nor replaced physical gathering, however they may be contributing to the diminishment of social and religious diversity in said gatherings.

The mobile learning initiative at Abilene Christian University is groundbreaking. The school is on the cutting edge of the intersection between new media, pedagogy, and community life.
Their experiments, research, and thoughtful reflection will help many more religious communities and institutions to become technically savvy and theologically savvy about technology today.


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*The New Media Project is a research project helping religious leaders become theologically savvy about technology. To request permission to repost this content, please contact newmediaproject@cts.edu.*