



Between Pretoria and Austin: a case study of the Society of Biblical Literature's *International Teaching Collaboration Program*¹

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Abstract

This self-reflective and critical-analytical contribution was on invitation prepared for the "Fostering Biblical Scholarship Worldwide: The Teaching and Mentorship Program of the International Cooperation Initiative" panel session of the *Society of Biblical Literature / European Association for Biblical Studies* conference, 31 July - 3 Augustus 2018, in Helsinki, Finland. In the first section, a brief philosophical orientation is offered in favour of a humanist-oriented rather than a business-minded understanding of tertiary education. The six forms of theological distance education in which the author had been involved professionally over a career of some 23 years, are listed, after which the practicalities of the author's participation in said "Teaching and Mentorship Program" is described. As specifically requested in the invitation to contribute to this international panel session of the conference, practical insights from this participation are listed in conclusion, in order to facilitate further such cooperation efforts by members of this and other academic societies. To this end, upon publication, members of this and similar academic societies will be referred to this contribution by the Society of Biblical Literature as a resource on which to draw, both intellectually and in preparation for similar practical international theological cooperation activities.

Keywords: tertiary theological education, international teaching cooperation, self-reflective research

Philosophical orientation

Often, initially and almost always, when electronically mediated education is discussed, it is done with a certain kind of business-minded "breathlessness" around two issues: the massification possibilities of education, and the supposed accompanying benefits of economies of scale (fewer lecturers, more students, greater flexibility, lower costs). Over the past two decades, none of these flaunted "advances" / "advantages" have had the same predicted outcomes in education as had been the effects recently of especially mobile phone technology on the taxi, accommodation and retail trades, for instance. Universities have not been "disrupted" – the awkward term for an industry that is revolutionised by current e-technologies – despite how some "evangelists" (- an actual term in the computer sales word; cf. Kessler, 2017, 5-6) of the new media would have it. Clearly, education is still experienced

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The Society of Biblical Literature website for more information on the International Cooperation Initiative is: www.sbl-site.org/InternationalCoopInitiative.aspx.



in society as something to do with excellence and dedication, rather than merely saved time and greater comfort (on the sociological aspect of “social acceleration”, (see Rosa, 2013). Put differently: there remains a sensed qualitative difference between reading for a degree and purchasing a pizza or arranging lodgings in just a moment (“i-zation”, in the language of Possemai, 2017), despite the at times unremitting business-talk, also within university administration circles on education and ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). In the background to what follows here, lie two different considerations, based on the nature of the university, which view forms and informs the way in which education and, more basic to that, humanity is regarded. The first of these two considerations relates to the adaptability of the university, though not in the manner in which this matter is most often spoken about (too brusquely summarised: “adapt or die”).

The oft-repeated insistence that the university should be relevant to its times, is namely – importantly here – of itself an indication that the university is indeed relevant (Rossouw, 1993: 35; cf. Lombaard, 2006: 71). Had this not been the case, society would have crafted alternate institutions. The institution of the university as the second longest enduring institution in the world, has proven its resilience precisely because it has managed to balance variously the demands of its times with the demands of the fields of knowledge served. Context and the mind seek some form of equilibrium within the university, ideally. This “balance” is however a delicate one, since it is between *critical* engagement, which implies at least some distance, and *critical engagement*, which implies a substantive measure of proximity; herein lies no zen perfection, no still point, no rest. However, never has the institution of the university been characterised by the absence of either of these two aspects; hence the intrinsic relevance of the university as a social institution.

Such a sense of the “balance” of the institution of the university is already the introduction to the second point of orientation here. That is namely that the university dare not be fully consumed by the spirit of its times and context. Formulated for the current period in history: the university cannot first and foremost be a business, as the managerialist view of the institution of the university (cf. analytically and in opposition to this trend e.g. Davis, Jansen van Rensburg & Venter, 2016:1480-1494; Asproumorgos, 2012: 44-49; Brecher, 2006: 6-12) so likes to insist (shortsightedly, and altogether self-servingly by those who propagate this view)². Human beings, most directly students, are not mere capital fodder in the optimisation of market share as the institution sets about to increase the return on investment value by the stakeholders in the education venture by maximising the client degree consumption experience – as the corporatised parlance of this kind of thinking about the university would be wont to formulate its manner of thinking. Important as money is, if that is what comes to determine all aspects of the university, the university has already died (Jansen, 2005a: 223; Jansen, 2005b: 11; cf. Habib, Morrow & Bentley, 2008: 140-155).

Much more important, with finance and all the other aspects of modern university bureaucracy (management, marketing, administration, etc.) which stand *at its service*, is the primary two-in-one role of education-and-research. These are human, humane and humanitarian considerations; differently formulated: the civilised, compassionate and public-spirited concerns. The university as a community of scholars namely serves humanity directly. This is done by attending to students, broader society and our fields of inquiry – these as not separate spheres of life, one apart from the other, but as intertwined parts of the reality to which

² Asproumorgos 2012, 48:

“The managerialist model cannot serve as a substitute for traditional approaches to quality assurance, which ultimately rest upon embodying in all individual and collective academic activity, professional norms and ethics of conduct, collegially regulated by the community of academics. With regard to the education dimension in particular, for genuine, quality university teaching to occur requires an ‘inner commitment’ grounded in professional ethics and professional self-respect.”



academics and the university (which are, equally so, not separate spheres, but interwoven) relate. In the case of theology-related subjects (on the principled place of theology at the university, see Wethmar, 1996: 473-490), this has influentially been formulated by Tracy (1981:5) as the so-called three publics of academic Theology: “the wider society, the academy, and the church” (recently expanded in Tracy, 2014: 330-334; more widely-ranging: Smit, 2007:431-454; cf. Brecher, 2004: 25-38). Such a service orientation cannot have money as its prime object (the latter would in the minds of academics render education as community service a different kind of “community service” – that demanded by judges of lawbreakers).

Mammon will always want to rule academia, as it seeks to do in all other spheres of life, reflexively; stringent measures based directly on a sound intellectual orientation on the nature of the university must therefore keep accountancy at bay. Serving our subjects and communities of interest (again, these two spheres overlap substantially) should be the leading orientation of academics, rather than primarily filling corporate purses in the most effective and productive / efficient manner³. This has clear implications for the ideological position new technologies and media are to be afforded within contexts of education.

Considering these matters has become important again in a time of emerging blockchain universities (<http://blockchainu.co/upcoming> / <https://woolf.university/#>, based on the bitcoin security system of Nakamoto, 2008)⁴, already well-established MOOCS, Massive Open Online Courses (cf. e.g. Lowenthal, Snelson & Perkins, 2018: 1-19), Telematic Education (cf. e.g. Dillon 1998: 33-50), e-courses and other forms of new electronically mediated education (cf., more widely considered, Possemai, 2017). The temptation is (for various reasons) all too easily to fall into “incoherent enthusiasms” (Agre, 1999: 37-41) about technology, in which the nature of the university, education and humanity remain unconsidered, and by implication all too easily diminished. More reasoned would be to describe (e.g. Lombaard & Rabe, 2005; 412-431; Lombaard & Le Roux, 2002: 12-15) and evaluate (e.g. Lombaard & De Villiers, 2004: 68-80) new options afforded us, in order to avoid the critically unconsidered use of new media (to which religion seems easily drawn, either in rejection or in overly eager adoption).

Researcher's background

The grounds and context for the reasoning here having been summarised above, a brief overview, for the sake of a self-reflectively oriented contribution such as this, of my experience in tertiary education.

The academic background from which I speak here – so that the interpreter may be interpreted (cf. Lombaard & Froneman, 2006: 155-156) – includes, apart from dual study backgrounds, first in Communication Studies⁵ and then in Theology, experience in different formats of distance education in a career of by now approaching a quarter of a century:

- One year as assistant to the director of the Centre for Continued Theological Education, University of Pretoria, in which the model of distance education followed was that short courses of various lengths (a few hours to a few days) were presented for already serving Reformed church ministers whose minimum qualification was a BD

³ To indicate the difference between these two measures, easily conflated, I quote Du Toit & Lombaard 2018, 97²: “To accede for a moment to the predilection of philosopher Slavoj Žižek for using examples from human ablutions in order to illustrate a point: toilets may be ever increasingly *productive* in saving water, up to the point where they are no longer *effective* in clearing away waste. Being ever more productive does not equate to being ever more effective.”

⁴ Again, on this matter too, the initial talk often consists of business-minded optimisms.

⁵ The subject Communication Studies is at times understood as a discipline related to Engineering. Here is meant Human Communications, including advertising, film studies, journalism and in my case also religious communication.



degree (± an extended and intensive taught MTh degree), who had to be present on campus for the duration of the course;

- Four years at the thoroughly ecumenical Theological Education by Extension College (Southern Africa) in Johannesburg, at which postal courses (combined with minimal contact-tuition group classes, where possible) were presented primarily for lay and ordained ministry candidates of mainline English speaking churches, resident mainly in South Africa but also in five other southern African countries, at Diploma (± degree) level and at two more basic, pre-Diploma levels (called the Certificate and the Award);
- Five years as Telematic Officer at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, during which undergraduate and select post-graduate courses were “telematicised” (then using *WebCT* software; at present, *Blackboard*), i.e. placed in different format to the traditional on webpages in order to serve as support to contact-tuition (traditional-format) classes;
- 12½ years at the University of South Africa, a distance mega-university⁶ with students across the world, providing education across all degree levels by postal and internet means (of late, almost exclusively the latter, using the *Sakai* platform rebranded as *myUnisa*), though in the case of my discipline (cf. Kourie, 2010: 17-31, Kourie, 2009: 148-173), with a focus on research students only, facilitated mostly by e-mail;
- In addition, at various times I have been introduced to video-mediated distance education techniques, namely live, at the University of Wisconsin’s Marathon County campus in the USA, and recorded, at Tabor College Adelaide in Australia; this, in addition to participating in the Society of Biblical Literature’s *International Teaching Collaboration Program* (cf. Du Toit & Langille, 2017), on which follows more below.

Drawing on this experience, also reflected on academically (Lombaard 1997: 9-12; Lombaard & Le Roux 2002: 12-15; Lombaard 2003: 43-61, Lombaard & de Villiers, 2004: 68-80; Lombaard & Rabe 2005: 412-431; Lombaard, Lombaard 2006: 71-84; Lombaard 2009: 17-29; Lombaard 2011a:, 49-65; Lombaard 2013: 771-778; Lombaard 2015, 2551-2556, Lombaard, 2016: 1-5), my participation in the Society of Biblical Literature’s *International Teaching Collaboration Program* is described below, after which some lessons learnt are indicated with a view to contributing to preparing for other instances of e-mediated academic cooperation in this programme and elsewhere.

Case study: Between Austin and Pretoria

As an instance of international telecollaboration (cf. Tanghe & Park, 2016: 3), colleague Kelly Coblentz-Bautch, who is professor of Religious Studies at St. Edward’s University, Austin, Texas, in August 2010 took up the 2009 initiative of the Society of Biblical Literature’s *International Teaching Collaboration Program*, and invited me to a guest lecture⁷. Her invitation was for me to present a class to her twice weekly *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* undergraduate group of some 25 students, on 14 October 2010, making use of the possibilities offered by Skype and the monitor set up for such purposes in her class venue. For colleague Coblentz-Bautch, this had not been a first experience with such international Skype-mediated lectures to her students; she had done this a few times before.

⁶ The mode of teaching-learning at Unisa is currently called ODeL – *Open, Distance and e-Learning*; cf. Mbatia 2013 for an extensive review. Often concepts of open learning are related, particularly by educationists, to a range of other concepts, with an accompanying nomenclature such as lifelong learning, flexible learning, learner support, blended learning, online learning, collaborative and Interactive learning, and the like.

⁷ I had subsequently also participated in the International Cooperation Initiative’s *International Voices in Biblical Studies* publication initiative, primarily through the facilitation of colleague Louis Jonker in Stellenbosch, which led to the publication of the 2012 volume *The Old Testament and Christian Spirituality. Theoretical and practical essays from a South African perspective* (which was subsequently awarded the 2013 Krister Stendahl medal for Bible scholarship by the Graduate Theological Foundation, USA; www.gtfeducation.org/academics/fellowships-and-prizes.cfm#Krister_Stendahl_Medal_in_Biblical_Studies). This volume may be downloaded *gratis* at www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/IVBS-Author2012.pdf.



The topic we agreed on, was “The mystifying mosaic of Moses: on Pentateuch theory and Biblical Spirituality”. It was a topic that fit with her course curriculum, which also fit with my specialism on Biblical Spirituality and my background in Pentateuch studies. (The wordplay in the lecture title, mosaic – Moses, was not original, but is derived from the 1976 / 1988 publications by Ferdinand Deist, respectively titled *Mosaïek van Moses. Pentateugnavorsing sedert die Reformasie* and *Mosaic of Moses*). The combination of spirituality with one of the most complex areas in Bible exegesis had the value that the students’ differing interests in taking the *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* course could in some manner be covered too: the combination of the two fields was new enough that it would be of value to the more committed students, without having to go into the technical details of the competing theories on the composition of the Pentateuch (cf. Zenger & Frevel, 2016: 87-151, in the most recent edition of this influential Introduction).

With such academic pairing arranged, three other sets of matters had to be prepared for:

- Time: Whereas in Europe and the USA the academic and calendar years do not coincide, in much of Africa and in Australia, they do. Apart from the difficulties this could bring about with the respective quieter teaching months of June/July to August/September and December to January, when colleagues may not be available, the language used to make arrangements can be confusing. An invitation for something in the Fall in the USA can have someone from the global south misjudge the intended date by some six months, given that the southern hemisphere Autumn centres around April. (In the internationalised world in which we live, it really is for the sake of effective communication high time that northern publishers and colleagues do away with such seasonal indications for e.g. book launches.) In addition, the seven hours difference in time zones had to be reckoned with, by arranging that I present the class from my study at home, with family matters arranged so as not to present any surprises;
- Technology: computer software and internet connections being what they are, the possibility was foreseen of problems developing with the sound and video connections not being successfully made at the time for which the lecture had been scheduled. Any such difficulties were pre-empted by a “test run” prior to the lecture, facilitated by the Manager of the Faculty Resource Center of Information Technology at St. Edward’s University.
- Language: US and South African English being quite different in accent, with problems of understanding that may result from the different pronunciation of words, which in a lecture to students comes over worse than in academic exchanges at conferences between colleagues who are more used to greater variance in accents, a simple solution presented itself. The full text of the lecture was sent to colleague Coblentz-Bautch beforehand, of which each student in class received a copy at the beginning of the lecture. This served its purpose well (as it would further use of the material by the students), with the discussion time after presenting the lecture influenced by these as much as by technical sound difficulties.

The lecture was subsequently published under the same title in the South African journal *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* (Lombaard 2011b: 1-5). However, immediately after the Skype class, colleague Coblentz-Bautch made use of the feedback tools in the *Blackboard* e-learning software used also at St. Edward’s University, to gauge the opinions of the students in the class about the lecture. The feedback was positive, including appreciation for the international aspect. It seems that the “universe” in “university” remains an innately appreciated characteristic of tertiary education. This was as much my experience too; the feedback I had upon request sent later in the year read as follows:



“The chance to share one's insights with students who are oceans and continents away is something very special. Usually this dynamic is limited to one's own students, and a few colleagues at conferences. In the past, it was only with substantial commitments in travel and time that lecturers had the privilege of sharing their newly developing ideas with students in other contexts. Now, via technology, and facilitated by the SBL's ICI program, this has become much easier. Although there is no match for the full dynamic of being present in person in a class, technologically mediated classes are by no means an alternative to be ignored: my experience teaching Professor Coblentz-Bautch's class at St Edward's University was as positive for me as it seems to have been for her students. Had it not been for the ICI program, this would never have happened. My thanks therefore as much to the to the initiators of the program as to Professor Coblentz-Bautch.”

Apart from other small gestures of appreciation and celebration, colleague Coblentz-Bautch and I also had the initially unplanned pleasure of meeting at the June 2012 London meeting of the SBL, and have since remained in occasional contact, including in recent months discussing the possibility of another such Skype class session in the foreseeable future. This will probably take the format of a series of shorter, recorded video lessons, to which students could after a greater period of reflection than is usually possible in a class context, provide responses. This would enable greater participation by students who may be more reticent to react immediately within “live” mediated events.

Lessons learnt and conclusion

As part of the preparation for this session, I was requested also to reflect on some lessons learnt, which may help other colleagues interested in this initiative in order that the proverbial wheel does not have to be invented again. These insights derive not only from the case study described above, but also from my wider experience in distance education.

- First, it is not entirely clear that one can fully prepare oneself by reading, and from discussions with colleagues more experienced in the use of such mediated formats. Teaching, contact of distanced, is as much a craft as many other human activities, with the experience always transcending any preparations undertaken. For the most part, it seems we all in a sense remain beginners (cf. also Lowenthal, Snelson & Perkins, 2018: 9-10, 15). “Showing how the process would work in practice” (a line from the *Report on ICI Teaching and Mentorship Volunteer Program* by Du Toit & Langille, 2017: 2), which expresses the sense of insecurity of many who embark on such an exercise, fits well with the general experience in such endeavours: we want to know what we will be entering into before we take the first step. Yet, only once such steps are taken does the preparation take more fully root.
- Mostly, participation is determined by personal factors (cf. also Lowenthal, Snelson & Perkins, 2018: 7-8, 15): some people simply are drawn to experiment with alternative approaches and media, and some are not. Thus, “informal networks” (*Report on ICI Teaching and Mentorship Volunteer Program* by Du Toit & Langille, 2017: 3) rather than institutionalised initiatives hold promise of greater numbers of participants in such ventures. In my experience, when colleagues have felt themselves pressured into such innovations, they soon find ways to withdraw their participation.⁸ This, not for any negative reasons; it is merely a function of personality, and within university life certainly also of the high sense of individual endeavour, characterised by independence and self-reliance and a critical orientation. These are all factors which contribute to the success of the university as a social institution. Colleagues whose

⁸ The implied reference here is not to the Society of Biblical Literature's *International Teaching Collaboration Program*, but to academic institutions which I have dealt with in various ways.



sense of individual endeavour for whichever reasons extends to investigating and adopting new technology mediated avenues of intellectual life, will do so naturally. (This insight also relates directly to the philosophical considerations indicated in the opening section of this contribution.)

- Different students react differently to such “mediated” education, with not all equally willing to react immediately; this, for either personal or cultural reasons. It should not be assumed that all students (or a whole generation) are similarly inclined towards the possibilities offered by new electronic media.
- One critique often expressed before new technologies are explored within educational context, is that the personal interaction as inherent part of the student-professor relationship would be compromised. In a sense, that is true: the face to face interaction is altered; lessened, even via video. On the other hand (Lombaard 2015: 2554),

“the ‘coldness’ that may be assumed of both technologically-mediated and distance education, is seldom experienced... a psychological feature of such study, “behind screens” as it were, is that students at times find themselves conveying aspects of their studies, lives and contexts that would less easily occur in face to face supervisor-student interactions... the two elements of technological and geographical distance do not detract from either the existential or the emotional ‘warmth’”.

Certainly, technological mediation changes the educational relationship. However, new media do not destroy this bond, and in some respects, the professor-student relationship is being enriched.

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