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Paula Drewek is Professor of Humanities at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, where she has taught courses in arts and ideas and comparative religion for over thirty years. Her PhD in the Sociology of Religion was a cross-cultural study of two communities of Baha'is — in Canada and India — using the faith development model of James W. Fowler. She recently published the text and workbook for a twelve-religion poster series published by Teachers Discovery, and participates in a weekly Interfaith dialogue TV series taped locally and aired on PBS in Detroit.

This paper will describe the various stages in the process of converting a traditional Comparative Religion course to an online offering. The preparation of the instructor for the concepts and format of online instruction, together with the institutional decisions which shape distance education programs will constitute the first, preparatory phase. The next stage will focus on the course organization, specific course objectives and the learning activities designed to accomplish these. The implementation of the course with its attendant challenges, successes and failures will constitute the last stage. The reader presently teaching online or contemplating the development of an online course may chose to benefit from the experiences of this author.

Two primary incentives encouraged the refitting of a successful Comparative Religion course to an online offering by this veteran classroom teacher. Macomb Community College was eager to launch a series of online courses in diverse disciplines, and, to that end, offered free training in the necessities for teaching online. Additionally, my 30+ years in the classroom had me begging for new challenges in course delivery. I wanted to tighten up and condense the essentials for teaching the seven religions I currently teach in Macomb Community College's sixteen-week semester. I also wanted to develop assignments and techniques to more thoroughly engage students in the material to be learned. These challenges, and the availability of training, began my journey. It has been sustained for the past four years by several benefits unanticipated during the initial phases of course development. I will share these in my evaluation of the course.

College Support

A six-week training course (online, naturally) was offered to interested faculty. There were about twelve of us at this stage. The course, offered through the Convene learning platform in California, used a textbook written by the Bedores (Gerry, Marlene, and Gerry, Jr.) called *Online Education: The Future is Now*

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The training accomplished two things. First, it familiarized the learner with the mechanical/technical operations of online instruction and interaction; secondly, it promoted a rethinking of one's discipline to coincide with a modular format using several kinds of instructional models.

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Hence, both practical skills and theoretical frameworks were integrated into the weekly assignments. The course culminated with each teacher developing a rudimentary syllabus for an online course in his or her discipline and conducting one week of the course with associates as "the class." I felt ill-prepared at the close of the training for the actual management of an online course. The old adage, "experience is the best teacher" emerged gradually as the stages from conception to implementation unfolded. My colleagues and I had many reservations and questions which were addressed in a series of seminars with the Convene staff. The next stage was a stipend of \$1,200 to support development of an online course which I tackled during a summer without teaching responsibilities. It was ready by the beginning of Fall term 1999.

The college continued to offer support in myriad ways by appointing a full-time director of online learning to manage the details of starting and developing new online courses. A faculty committee of more seasoned online teachers was available for whatever needs and questions we had in the initial stages of development or teaching online. An online "faculty lounge" was and is available to share concerns and solutions. Support was further buttressed by a full time technical person to serve both faculty and students. As online offerings have grown additional technical support persons have been added.³

Particularities of Community College Teaching

The fact that two-year community colleges offer only the beginnings of study in any discipline restricts possible course offerings to introductory-level courses which offer a broad exposure to a wealth of material in one or two semesters. In religious studies we are teaching courses which are the students' first exposure to the content areas of our discipline. One challenge this situation poses ensuring the instructor's enthusiasm, engagement and flexibility throughout a career of teaching basically the same course. Professors do not have the opportunities available to our university counterparts to pursue interests in the areas of our graduate work. Yet another challenge is to continually increase student engagement in the learning process so

that objectives can be met more effectively. The first challenge relates to personal/professional growth, while the second relates to student success. I have found the development of an online course to offer opportunities for both.

Typically, the primary focus of community colleges is on teaching and learning. Much of one's attention as a teacher is student-centered rather than discipline-centered. This situation presents a positive opportunity for instructors interested in maintaining the "joy of teaching." The potential for instructor involvement in the processes of student learning is enhanced in the online environment since the contact between instructor and student is more frequent and intensive. The student-centered focus of online instruction emphasizes such processes as the development of individual student skills (analysis, synthesis, comparison, interpretation and evaluation); demonstrating relationships between concepts and their applications; connecting abstract ideas across disciplines; overcoming student deficiencies in reading, writing, vocabulary mastery, and test taking; connecting course content to student experiences outside the course.

Yet another opportunity for effective teaching and learning at the community college is the establishment of a more personalized "community of learners." The online environment increases the degree of interaction among class members through the discussion boards developed to share and process student assignments. Each student has access to the submissions of the others on the week's assignments and projects. Students naturally share their experiences, difficulties, solutions, often personal, which touch upon the assignments and offer suggestions and support to one another. Clearly, the volume of student-student and student-teacher interchange is much greater online than in on ground classes offering the potential for synergy which plays a vital role in online learning.⁴

Course Design

Pitfalls and possibilities

As White notes,⁵ one of the first pitfalls of online instruction is "that teachers are using digital technologies to supplement or imitate "talking heads" in the classroom." When teachers use new technological tools to fit old pedagogical habits, it doesn't work. Some adaptation of content and learning strategy is necessary to refit an existing course into an online format. The instructor newly developing a course will have some "givens" in the instructional model based upon institutional decisions: the length of the course; credits offered; the learning platform; and what kinds of interactions will be possible with institutional technology; requirements for student entry; and whether the learning platform is synchronous or asynchronous. The instructor also

needs to consider capacities of the students' computer equipment.

Parameters

The author began with the following parameters based upon the above: a three-credit hour eight-week course, which is the equivalent of sixteen weeks of classroom instruction with a twenty student ceiling on enrollment. We were partnered to the Convene Learning Platform in California, which used an asynchronous course delivery with two possible hook-up modes: logging onto the WWW or a modem dial-up with a download of all messages followed by exiting to working offline.⁶ We had no opportunities to play movies or recordings in our virtual classroom; furthermore many computers (my own included) could not support the hard drive memory required for those operations. So, this has to be a print-based virtual classroom without multi-media enhancements unless students individually wanted to access them on the web. Gone were several of my stock-in-trade classroom tools for enriching the learning environment — slides, films, recordings. I would have to come up with other ways to provide variety and tap the imaginative mode.

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Another challenge was to maintain and accomplish the same objectives in eight weeks as in the sixteen-week on ground classes since they were equivalent in course credits. The pre-existing class had seven major course objectives (see appendix). I modified only one — the required field trip or religious experiences component of the sixteen-week course. Instead, I added: "To demonstrate an awareness of cultural contexts of geography, history, art, and important persons and events as they relate to the religions studied." I reasoned that students taking a course online were possibly doing so because of time and place restrictions that would make the three required field trips unreasonable and impossible.

Choice of Models

Based upon the five design models described in Bedore^{7A} I chose the "bounded interactive" model that was suited to both class size and the level of dialogue I anticipated. Our online classes were restricted to twenty students initially (recent union contract raised that to twenty-three). The "bounded interactive model" is suggested for 15-25 students per class and is designed to keep the classroom dialogue at a manageable level and not overload students or instructor. The highly interactive model is intended for only 10-15 students. Bounded interactive anticipates 5-8 messages per student each week. "When the message rate exceeds 200 messages per workshop (weekly), we are reaching the limit at which students and facilitators can be expected to function comfortably."

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The instructor manages the dialogue levels by the number of assignments and forums s/he creates for student interchange in the virtual classroom — the public forum of the class. Shifting assignments away from the virtual classroom through group or independent study reduces the discussion that takes place without sacrificing course content. However, effective classroom dialogue is not simply a matter of quantity, but also of quality. The quality issue will be addressed under implementation.

Among the tools available for course design, I relied most on study questions; seminars on common texts; group work; and creative story applications/situations involving course concepts. These will be illustrated in the following sections. My experience in various modes of classroom instruction served me well by providing a variety of verbal activities to engage students in the learning process.

Defining Course Objectives and Structure

My first task was to adapt course objectives to weekly objectives. This process was really curriculum review. Weekly objectives need to be "outcomes" stated in terms of specific behaviors. The first week's outcomes may serve to illustrate this adaptation.

1. Describe how studying religions differs from the practice of religion
2. Use concepts for the study of religion in chapter 1 in a paragraph you write about your study of religion
3. Distinguish between different approaches to studying religions: theological, historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological and humanistic
4. Describe and illustrate 6 dimensions as a framework for comparing religions
5. Describe interactions between religion and science, religion and selected social issues

Following the first week's introduction to course concepts, methods, one another, and the diversity of religions, I chose to do one religion per week, leaving the last week free for projects and a final exam. The compression of subject matter into eight weeks forced me to omit religions and issues included in the 16 week course. While the organizational format appeared sound and balanced I have continued to revise objectives and assignments with each new term of teaching.

From Objectives to Learning Activities

One of the premises of online instruction is that students don't learn simply by reading or hearing but by "doing" something with what they're learning. What kind of doing is possible while sitting at a computer? In developing assignments and activities a variety of tools are available. The application and combination of tools prescribed by the curriculum design drive the learning process to the desired conclusions.⁹

The objectives provided the platform for the assignments or learning tools. The freedom to devise assignments, exercises and the like to implement the objectives was the fun part of the course design. Some learning activities could be moved directly from the classroom to the online format. One of these was the Socratic seminar as taught by Dennis Gray of San Diego, California. Socratic seminars are open-ended dialogues using a common text. They encourage critical reading and thinking skills, social discourse and team-building guided by a facilitator. Rather than conveying information, dialogues are an effective way to accomplish a number of skill objectives as well as in-depth examination of issues and concepts through a text.¹⁰ Some modification was made in the presentation of the dialogue process for online students. Instead of beginning with student questions, I supplied 3-4 initial questions to begin the dialogue. Because of the asynchronous format, I limited dialogues to a 24-hour period. Students submitted responses to the initial questions to the discussion forum created for the dialogue. Earlier submissions usually generated more student interchange than later ones. After the initial postings it was the responsibility of students to question and comment on one another's work to generate dialogue. The role of facilitator is especially important at this juncture to probe responses for clarification, assumptions and further questions and to steer the direction of dialogue to a few focus areas. Early dialogues are often very diffused, with topics veering off in many directions often unrelated to the shared text. For this reason it is necessary for the instructor to log-onto the learning platform frequently to track and guide the exchange. Socratic seminars always focus in the direction of the text rather than away from it.

Last summer I experimented with moving the dialogue to a synchronous chat room format during an agreed-upon hour when many students would be online.¹¹ After two attempts, I eliminated this format since so much of the time was simply taken up in greeting one another, saying goodbye and in opinion-focused rather than text-specific discussion. In short, the discussion was rather superficial.

New Assignments Developed for the Online Format

Three assignments which were innovations of the online formatting of the course involved different skills. One of these was an analysis of the Hopi Emergence Myth to develop student reading ability in connotative meanings as well as to introduce the importance of cosmogonic

myths in developing worldviews. Questions were posed after a reading of the myth that probed religious issues implicit in cosmogonic myths: What is the nature of sacred powers? — of humans? What is the relationship established between humans and sacred powers? Are there intermediaries? If so, what are they like? How are good and evil understood? What are human relationships with other creatures and groups? Are there unique features of tribal identity implied?

This assignment proved to be important for developing reading skills as well as the ability to define and support issues adequately with reference to the text of the reading. Several students had difficulty with the assignment which allowed me to assist them individually through responses to their work. I then repeated a similar assignment using Hindu myths of creation and asked for a comparison of the two myths in terms of the basic questions posed. This exercise established continuity in course format, and the continuing development of skills and concepts addressed in religious studies.

A second new assignment focused on the student's ability to connect learning about religions with their own experiences and personality. I developed these for the unit on Hinduism since it is often the most difficult religion for students to grasp. Students were to choose one of the following.

Assignment 1: Compare three of the various yogas as means to moksha. Find features for comparison. Which would you choose and why?

Assignment 2: Compare worship practices of Hinduism with those of another faith (your choice). What impact does worship of the Great Goddess have in Hinduism? Briefly explain two of her forms and attributes. Does she have a parallel in the worship practices of the contrast faith you have chosen?

Both assignments were responded to in discussion forums for the entire class.

A third new assignment for the online course required students to use their imaginative faculties, and served to vary the kinds of assignments students were completing. I developed these for the Judaism unit, and later translated a similar assignment into the unit on Islam. After reading a lecture on the mitzvot, students were asked to:

1. Create a Jewish character (male, female, Orthodox, Conservative or Reform) in the contemporary world or choose one from film (several films were suggested). Describe daily events in the life of this character that would be influenced by the mitzvot. End with the celebration of Sabbath: describe preparation for, experiences of and meaningfulness for Jews.

2. **OR** Create your character and follow this character through the stages of life rituals: bris, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage, funeral and shiva.

Formatting Course Delivery for Consistency and Continuity

Based upon what we had learned in the training course, students need a detailed overview of each unit or week outlining the following: See Appendix B for a sample unit.

1. Week's objectives, including key vocabulary terms
2. Reading assignments
3. Written assignments: when due and in what forum, preparation needed, approximate time needed for completion, and points offered
4. Tests or quizzes

The sample unit should illustrate how objective #3 is accomplished through assignment #2. To regulate the quantity of dialogue in the virtual classroom, some assignments are sent to my personal mailbox for grading, especially if they involve a high level of skill development (the Hopi myth assignment). Most finished assignments are posted to the discussion forums for all to read and respond to (Chief Seattle's speech dialogue). This feature creates an open classroom where students learn from each other. It is a major asset of the practice in active learning offered by the online classroom.

Lectures

Online learning does not emphasize the lecture as an important part of the process of student learning. As White notes in his review of key learning principles,¹² "People learn by doing... Even if the lectures are inspiring, inspiring words alone will not help learners to internalize knowledge and skills. Learners need to be actively engaged." Nevertheless, my course incorporated two lectures each week in addition to the textbook and supplementary readings. I reasoned, since this was to be students' first exposure to the concepts and methods

of Comparative Religion, lectures provided focus and application of concepts stated in the week's objectives. Lectures also served to synthesize, integrate, and apply key vocabulary terms. The first lecture each week was devoted to major beliefs, figures and worldview of each religion, while the second focused on practice or application of basic beliefs and concepts. The lecture-writing process draws on one of the major skills of community college teachers — the ability to synthesize and condense material so as to be accessible to students with little or no background in the subject area and, often, poor learning skills. Given the online emphasis on doing, not merely reading, two lectures per week seemed optimum.

Small Group Projects

One tool for regulating the quantity of dialogue in the virtual classroom is the creation of small groups focused on specific projects or topics. They divert dialogue from the main forums of the classroom to individual forums created for the group members. I have used the small group format in two ways. Within the weekly religion units, small focus groups were used to respond to a variety of questions on Christianity (one could use any faith group). Each group focused on a specific arena of questions/issues: scriptures, history, biography, theology, groups and denominations, etc. I created small groups to manage the quantity of information/issues incorporated into the unit in both text and lectures. The Blackboard platform has made the creation of small groups much easier as it establishes several forms of communication among participants: small group forum, email and chat room.

Each group of 3-4 persons is named to correspond to one of the centers of early Christianity: Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, etc. Each group is responsible for answering about 10-12 questions during the first part of the week. Then, in a forum for the entire class I submit a quiz, focusing on select questions per group to which the groups post their answers through a group facilitator. The small group assignment helps prepare the entire class for the test that follows the week. It also generates a good deal of dialogue on the unit concepts and objectives.

The second small group assignment involves a course project. Each student has the choice of an individual project on a religious issue or theme of their choice (several are suggested) or a group "ritual project." Students make their selection of projects the second week of class. The ritual pilgrimage project is included in Appendix C.

Completed projects are posted in the discussion forum the last week of class and offer all students access to either the pilgrimages of the various groups or the topic research of those choosing the individual project. This feature of course development has proved very effective for broadening the scope of religions and issues studied and for increasing the synergy of

classroom dialogue.

Testing

The kinds of tests, where administered and how, the value given to them in the final grade, and whether to use them at all are issues which the online teacher addresses in course design. To maintain consonance with my on ground classes, I decided to administer tests and to do so online. To keep my grading and feedback of test results at a manageable level, I decided to test every two weeks. Each test incorporates objectives from two religions: the first would include the introductory week and the Native Americans; then Hinduism and Buddhism; Judaism and Christianity; and, finally, a test on Islam alone at the end of week seven. The format of each test involves more written work in description and application of key terms and concepts than those for on ground students. I acknowledged that students would have access to written materials of the class for their tests, but the tests were geared to the integration and understanding of unit concepts more than simple recall of information. Students were allowed 24 hours to read and respond to the tests and send them to my personal mailbox.¹³ During the 24 hours of testing, I offered my home phone number to students for any questions they may have during a designated two hours the evening the test was due. After two weeks or more reading individual responses to the assignments, I already had a good knowledge of each student's abilities, mastery of material, writing style and learning difficulties. I was not overly concerned about the authenticity of test responses submitted.

The unit tests were followed by a final exam the last week in which I assigned each student three of the twelve final exam questions. The exam questions were similar to those of the on ground finals - essay questions involving the comparison of religions. For example: "Compare the five pillars of faith in Islam to the Mitzvoth of Judaism;" "Most religions we study have these common elements. Describe five with examples from five different faiths;" "Name and explain one symbol each of four different faiths."

Assessment

The balance of assessment components shifted the emphases from the on ground to the online class. Normally, my student's final grade reflects 60 percent tests, 15 percent class discussion, 15 percent final project and 10 percent field trips. In the online class, assignments and dialogue in the discussion forums were the bulk of evaluative material. More weight was therefore given to assignments (35 percent) and less to tests (50 percent) with the remainder for final projects (15 percent).

My first two online classes used both a qualitative and quantitative numerical grade for each

week's general discussion — responses/questions to others' work or clarifications and additions to one's own. Assigning point values to discussion reinforced the course "attendance" requirement of being online five out of seven days per week. This standard was suggested for all of Macomb's online classes to encourage student responsibility. However, it encouraged a lot of innocuous chat simply to hike up one's grade. It also made extraordinary demands on the teacher to monitor the qualitative and quantitative contributions of each student in addition to grading three assignments per student each week. I dropped the separate assessment in favor of a single five points per week for discussion. The present weighting of assessment components has worked well.

At the close of the design phase, the teacher should have on disk all the above course components "ready to roll." It is not feasible to reconstruct objectives, assignments, supplementary readings, tests, lectures and projects once a course has started. The pace is too fast, the demands of students too pressing, and the grading too time consuming to seriously devote any time to the curriculum itself once the course has begun. Modifications must be made following the course before its next offering.

Implementation

Developing synergy in the 1st week

The amount of dialogue generated in the public forum of the class determines synergy. High synergy formats lean towards the socratic end of learning models while lower synergy exists with more independent study. "Higher levels of dialogue are associated with individual discussion questions and open discussion assignments. Lower dialogue levels result from assignments that focus on individual efforts such as reading and submitting papers."¹⁴ Since the Comparative Religion course was most likely students' first exposure to the content of the discipline, I chose to encourage a high level of dialogue to increase synergy. The outcomes of such dialogue benefit all as a community of learners, but are especially important in exposing the less able or less experienced students to the thoughts and responses of others. To this end, a lively interchange the first week is begun by having each student submit a spiritual or religious autobiography as a means to introduce one another within the content concerns of comparative religions. The autobiographies help establish a community of learning by identifying individual experiences. Instructor interaction is not high at this point. Remaining assignments maintain the dialogue with one another generated in assignment 1 (see Appendix D). While dialogue is a major source of learning in a virtual classroom, course design must consider realistically the ability of students and instructor to maintain the expected level of activity.

Managing the course

Both new and experienced online students will have many questions about assignments, grades, technical difficulties and the like. The Blackboard platform has allowed the creation of a forum specifically to handle course-related questions. This forum is used for clarifications about assignments and other issues needing an immediate response. Once I was two hours late posting a test. By the time I got online to do so, there were twelve messages asking where the test was. So this forum is also a place for blowing off some steam which is a good outlet for student frustrations. Better they should be public and addressed than hidden and perhaps ignored. The course related forum keeps an instructor constantly in touch with students, and there are always some who require more attention than others. I am regularly reminded that community college teaching is a "service oriented" profession, and that characterization is magnified in an online class.

Regulating the quality and quantity of dialogue

As with any on ground class, some students will participate often in the virtual classroom forums and others will submit only their assignments with the odd comment here and there. It is the instructor's task to try to balance the dialogue so that diverse points of view are shared and responded to. Frequent logging into the course platform (usually daily) is necessary to do this. It involves probing and directing the dialogue through questions, encouraging responses or corrections. Often the instructor's experience of religions is appropriate to give a context to the issues under discussion and send the dialogue to a more realistic level. When a student has been "absent" for several days it is necessary to personally e-mail the student to find out what is going on.

Another challenge to the instructor is noted by Jon Spayde in his article "College at Home" — the "spirit of chat." This disease refers to a level of dialogue which does not move beyond the surface of issues, opinions and feelings. It is deadly to the synergy of online learning because it skirts the course objectives and attendant processes of critical thinking in favor of "feel good" responses. It can also bore students who have a genuine interest in course content.¹⁵ Every online class I have taught has had students predisposed to the "spirit of chat." It is the instructor's responsibility to guide the level of dialogue by personally contacting students about the quality of their work with specific suggestions to improve. It has been my experience in online instruction that students really desire to do well. They usually just need enough guidance to point out how.

Evaluation

Since evaluation is necessary to determine whether the course is meeting student and instructor expectations, I offer two forms of evaluation here: student evaluation and teacher evaluation. The form I developed for student evaluation was simple and short, using a 4-point scale (4 being high) to rate all aspects of the course: syllabus, assignments, readings/seminars, tests, text, lectures, administration, projects, student and instructor interaction and most and least favorite aspects of the course. Here are some things I learned in each of two classes.

Group 1

- Strong points (3.5 and higher) were assignments, readings/seminars, lectures
- Close seconds were syllabus and projects
- Weakest area was course administration (grading, forums, amount of material covered in assignments), 2.8

Several students faulted me for not clarifying expectations of participation in the VC and optional assignments. This was soon remedied in group 2.

- Favorite aspects: all; interaction with students; Islam; religious dimensions; Buddhism; Projects; Judaism; Christianity
- Least favorites: too much material; team project; fewer test questions; website; need test each week

Group 2 Higher overall evaluations with the following highlights:

- Strong points (3.5 and higher) were syllabus, readings/seminars, textbook, lectures, projects, student interaction
- Close seconds were assignments
- Tests, administration and instructor interaction were all 3.2

- Favorite aspects: Islam, Judaism, Native American, projects, Christianity, Buddhism
- Least favorite: Hindu; assignments; Judaism, Islam; too many assignments

The second group had no ratings below 3.0 (good) but both classes felt the amount of material covered was too much. Students found the 3 rather challenging assignments per week to be too time-consuming and difficult. Some students indicated they would like verbal feedback on each of their assignments.

Instructor evaluation

- Assignments: The demand of grading 60+ assignments per week is excessive. In future, I would change this to two graded assignments with other topics posted for general discussion.

Other learning tools such as pairs sharing or small groups would simplify the required work but not sacrifice learning objectives.

Another tool to simplify the grading of assignments would be a list of frequent weaknesses or comments (similar to banks of FAQ) which could be cut, pasted and mailed in response to each student's weekly work.

A third tool already used was the ability to grade student work from the computer screen instead of printing it first. In earlier classes, I felt uncomfortable grading work on screen since I was accustomed to comment on portions of the assignment as I reviewed it.

- Classroom dialogue: The 3-4 forums each week have encouraged very high levels of dialogue and good synergy, resulting in an exciting class according to many of the respondents as well as instructor. The insight gained is invaluable to my clearer understanding of the processes of student learning. Additionally, the joys and progress of student learning also become more visible, thus encouraging to both students and teacher.

- Insight into the learning process: Much of what remains hidden in a classroom of 35

students becomes exposed in the virtual classroom. The initial world views of students, how they process and assimilate new ideas, their ability to relate those to the experiences of their daily life are a few of the areas exposed in an online class. I am convinced that it keeps me in touch with the learning processes of my students, enabling me to be a more effective teacher.

- Course administration (management): This feature continues to be the most challenging aspect of online teaching for this instructor. It requires frequent logging into the course platform, clear and helpful feedback to students and steering the dialogue in the direction of course objectives while meeting individual student needs and concerns. All of this must be accomplished in a timely manner which places many demands on the instructor. For this reason, I have chosen not to offer the online course each semester even though demand has been high. Course registration usually closes after 2 or 3 days of offering the class.

- Carry over: Developing and teaching the online class has transformed the way I teach in my traditional classroom in many ways. Adapting course objectives to weekly outcomes has helped make my expectations of students expressed in the objectives much clearer. Online teaching has also provided the incremental steps necessary to achieve course objectives through learning exercises and activities which engage students in the process of their own learning. With time and use the instructor is able to gauge which assignments are accomplishing their desired purpose and which are not. It has made the class fun — both for me and the students — due to the activity-based assignments.

Gateway and Retention

Retention policies and practices are a major focus of community colleges today. The "revolving door" of 10-20 years ago is no longer acceptable in the face of increased competition for students from many postsecondary institutions. Retention is closely connected to student preparation for the course, and the requirements for entry are established by institutional policies. Those requirements at Macomb include a self-test of attributes needed for online student success before student enrollment. If the student deems him/herself qualified, they are allowed to enroll. Prior to the start of classes new students are given Blackboard entry and password and complete an orientation in the use the platform technology. The orientation is mandatory and completion or testing out with at least 80% is necessary to be added to the course roster.

Most students who complete the first two weeks of a course will finish successfully with a "C" or better. Students who fall behind and cannot manage the course requirements for this initial period will usually drop or disappear. Retention rates have been higher in my online courses than in on ground courses with higher grades. Of twenty-two enrolled students in last Fall's

class, there were two withdrawals after week 2 and two who disappeared before week 4. Of the remaining students, there were 6 A's, 11 B's and 1 C. The engaged learning environment, the fast pace of the units, and shorter time span of the course leave little room for drifting away or inattention more common in the traditional classroom. The higher retention and grades may be due to the more mature, self-motivating student enrollment in online classes.

Future Directions

Since this paper has described the specific processes and decisions of refitting an existing Comparative Religion class to an online environment, I have not focused on the theoretical learning principles and their incorporation. I would like to include these as checkpoints for those who may wish to enter the online teaching arena and as guides to my further revisions and goals and those of my readers.

The learning environment is:

- fun
- engaging
- experiential
- interactive
- set in a meaningful context
- activity-based¹⁶

Arenas targeted for future implementation are the incorporation of quick time movies, pictures and audio recordings to the online class. In particular, the Detroit area Harvard Pluralism Project with which I am associated has developed a photo exhibit of area religious communities and is in the process of recording audio portraits of communities in action. I would like to make these materials available to online students as well to supplement their experience in the religious communities in our Metro Detroit area.

Endnotes

¹ Bedore, Drs. Gerry and Marlene, with Gerry Jr. *Online Education: The Future is Now*. The

Socrates Distance Learning Technologies Group: Phoenix, AZ, 1998.

² The 5 models offered by the Bedores are relative to levels of interactivity in the online classroom. The interactive model is designed for fewer students, while the less interactive for up to 60 students.

³ Macomb Community College currently has online registration, an articulation arrangement for course transfer with the Michigan Virtual Learning Collaborative, Franklin University, Walsh College and U. of Michigan, Dearborn to absorb all student online credits into their baccalaureate programs. The online student body has grown from 80 to 1600 in the two years from 1998 to Fall, 2001 in 81 sections.

⁴ Bedore, 51.

⁵ Frank White. "A Review of the Learning Principles that Underlie Virtual Learning Environments." October, 1999. Unpublished manuscript.

⁶ Macomb switched its learning platform from Convene to Blackboard beginning in 2000, as did the Michigan Virtual Learning Cooperative. This move to a web-based platform required only a brief introductory orientation for both students and faculty to become proficient in its use. The Blackboard program has avoided many of the server problems we faced with Convene.

⁷ To add audio and visual enrichment to my Comparative Religion classes, I had purchased several copies of Diana Eck's *On Common Ground* CD Rom as a library resource. However, online students prefer accessing library materials from their computers.

^{7a} The models, noted briefly in footnote 2 are: Interactive, bounded interactive, consultative/interactive, independent/consultative, special configuration. These progress from highly interactive to low interactivity consonant with number of students per class and design dialogue levels per student.

⁸ Bedore, 100.

⁹ Bedore, 109-110. He then offers over 40 such tools.

¹⁰ Dialogue texts chosen for the online students change periodically, but this year have included: Chief Seattle's Speech to Governor Stevens in 1854; a Zen story; two newspaper articles on Judaism in contemporary life; an excerpt from Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* on atonement for the Christianity unit; and a newspaper article on Islam entitled "Muslims Try to Correct Wrong Beliefs about Islam."

¹¹ Synchronous forums must be timed so that students are "present" during agreed-upon hours. Asynchronous forums are available whenever individuals choose to access them. The Blackboard platform adopted in 2000 allows both.

¹² Ibid, 5.

¹³ The Blackboard platform has a Digital Drop Box for student work which can be accessed only by the instructor but which permits comments on the material submitted.

¹⁴ Bedore, 115.

¹⁵ Frank White reflects on this and other issues which disillusion an interested student in his unpublished paper, "Computer-Mediated Distance Learning: Critical Reflections on a Personal Experience." December, 1999.

¹⁶ White, "A Review of the Learning Principles that Underlie Virtual Learning Environments.", 7.