

What the online church can learn from online education

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This season in ministry has forced churches everywhere to move to an online environment, exploring video conferencing, live streaming, pre-recording and video editing segments for their website, and trying to navigate pastoral care for those not connected, as well as those already saturated with online content. Someone joked last week on our clergy call that leading an online church was definitely something that was not taught in seminary!



While navigating this pandemic is happening within our churches, our schools are facing unprecedented upheaval as well. Teaching online takes specific training because learning behaviors are different in an online environment. Many teachers are frustrated that they are being thrown into online teaching without adequate preparation, recognizing the different skillset necessary to craft effective instruction across technology.

I live in both of these worlds. My training and background are in both ministry and education, and in fact, my current area of research is in clergy teaching style and adult learning in congregations. Listening to colleagues navigate both sides of this pandemic has shown me again how those of us in fulltime ministry might benefit from what the field of online education already knows.

For instance, research in online learning environments has shown that online learners have a drastically reduced attention span for presentations compared to those learning in face-to-face presentations. In fact, one study showed people's attention span in an online environment was approximately 6 minutes long,¹ whereas an average attention span for a lecture is arguably 10-15 minutes.² In order to keep people engaged, the facilitator must draw the learner back in through interaction or change in environment somehow, thus starting the clock over for one's attention span. How might churches adjust online programming knowing this?

A church is not a classroom; however, one could argue it is a primary place people go to learn about God. In fact, I would argue they are inextricably linked. Any clergyperson could explain spiritual formation through ritual activity; the truth is, we know we learn and are formed through repetitious activity, we know we learn through symbolism, we know we learn through worship, we know we learn at church. We know humans learn through relationship, and understanding worship as a dialogical relationship between God and his people leads us to see learning through

¹ Guo, P. J., Kim, J. & Rubin, R. (2014). How video production affects student engagement: An empirical study of MOOC videos, presented at ACM Conference on Learning @ Scale, New York, 2014.

² Sousa, D. (2017). *How the brain learns* (5th ed). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Publishing.

that relationship, as well. If we are learning through our relationship with the Lord, and that relationship is nurtured at church, it is helpful to consider at least what we know about human learning while staring at a screen for hours on end.

Depending on what you are trying to accomplish virtually as a church, and depending on your technological capability, here are four best practices from what we know in online education *transferred* to suggestions for adjusting online ministry:

Research in Online Education Suggests...	Transfer for Online Ministry Suggests...
<p>1. Length. Consider shorter segments (less than 10 min each) by different people and/or in different locations; string these segments together to prolong people’s ability to focus. Every time the person/environment changes it starts the clock over for attention span.</p>	<p>1. Length. Consider pre-recording different segments of your worship service using a variety of faces and locations, then publish it using streaming. Editing together pre-recorded material enables changes of view and persons involved. You can include more households and engage more members through producing the segments and by engaging their attention during the broadcast. There are simple ways to pre-record and still broadcast livestream.</p>
<p>2. Imagery and imagination. Intersperse speaking with images occasionally.</p>	<p>2. Imagery and imagination. Use an image (or images) during your sermon when possible; use images during the readings (check copyright), ensuring Scripture is coming alive and not being shortchanged; shorten the duration of the sermon itself to 10 minutes focusing in on one clear point; work to include more imagery in your language during the sermon itself, painting clear pictures for listeners; include discussion questions that enable members to connect the sermon’s main point to their past experiences and their imagination of the future.</p>
<p>3. Presentation. Do not rely on slides to present information; it is the least effective teaching tool when used alone in an online environment. If you must use them, include the speaker’s face while presenting, do not put full sentences on the slides, and use images on slides whenever possible. Consider active tablet writing slides (like Khan Academy) when appropriate.</p>	<p>3. Presentation. If using technology to teach (catechism courses, confirmation classes, evangelism classes, etc.), resist the urge to use PowerPoint slides and just talk over them. If you have to use them, do not put a lot of information on each slide– put enough to jog your memory and then just speak. No one can focus on long strings of words on slides while trying to process what is being said and this is exacerbated online. As much as you can, include ample time for participants to discuss the information, connect it to prior experiences, and transfer to future possibilities.</p>

<p>4. Engagement. Speak naturally. It may occur to you to slow down and speak carefully so that learners can catch everything. Research shows, however, the more naturally you speak, even if that means faster, the more engaging your presentation is in an online environment; passion transmits through the screen.</p>	<p>4. Engagement. Get interactive as much as you can. Don't be afraid to use conferencing platforms for Sunday morning services rather than just live streaming. You can show videos of people reading Scripture (collected from different households each week) or musical worship during the conference call, and intersperse the sermon with discussion questions. Churches can use the breakout rooms to pray for each other. The thing to remember is to engage the people by being yourself, not a rehearsed, polished performer. What can you do to enable the people to be included?</p>
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One disclaimer here: the purpose of all of this is to minister to people, not to entertain them. Therefore, when making choices in an online environment don't focus on bells and whistles, but instead focus on how to dialogue with your people. Focus on connection. All of these suggestions are made with that intention, not the implication that churches need to produce high quality theatrics. No, the focus of this article is to encourage churches to have personal connection with the people, which cannot be done through live streaming alone, nor can it be done if we present long, boring lectures delivered without understanding the limitation of an average human attention span.

No matter what you try, commit to continuous improvement. Ask for feedback from trusted members and slowly work to incorporate their feedback. In this season we are aiming for people over perfection, and faithful over fancy. It will not be feasible to incorporate all of these things, but keeping them in mind as you reach parishioners through computer screens will help retain relationship and encourage ongoing formation during this pandemic season.

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