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# The Religious Formation of Graduate Ministry Students in an Online Wisdom Community

Discovering a Voice to Preach

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Key words: adult learners, community, e-learning, online wisdom community, theological education

**Abstract:** This paper explores the formation of online wisdom communities and the experiences of doctoral students studying preaching within a hybrid theological preaching program. This study highlights how instructors can enhance the physicality in the online community experience, helping adult learners feel connected and thus have a high level of learning.

Learning and learning communities have garnered the attention of education researchers for years. Various learning theories (i.e. constructivist, social, behavioral) help us to understand how adults learn. Within the past two decades, adults have started taking online and hybrid courses while engaged in online learning communities. This practice is increasingly more prevalent in graduate theological education, but little research has been done in this area. In graduate theological education there is a dynamic process of transformation that happens to individuals.

The purpose of this paper is study this transformative process and to discuss the question, “How do ministerial adult learners experience wisdom community in a hybrid doctoral program in preaching?” To help answer this question, ministerial students and alumni from Aquinas Institute of Theology (AIT) were asked to participate in this mixed study. AIT is a school of theology in St. Louis, MO., USA, and is owned and operated by the Order of Preachers (a Roman Catholic religious community). There are three areas of this hybrid doctoral preaching program the study examined: the hybrid doctoral program in preaching (D.Min.), the formation of a wisdom community, and the experiences of enrolled students. In years past, this transformative paradigm of preachers finding their voice could only have happened solely in a physical location, but now this process of deep reflection and communal interaction can be done in an online wisdom community. When one defines community by what people do together instead of by physical location, online community can exist.

## Background

Adults learn in many ways evidenced in many theories of adult learning. One such theory, the social learning theory (Merriam & Cafferalla, 2002; Merriam, Cafferalla, & Baumgartner, 2007), suggests that adults learn as a result of their interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). When adults conduct research together, share information and build new knowledge, their learning environment becomes more than just a social setting, but a community of learners. This ‘*sense of community*’ contributes to sustaining, attracting, and retaining the learners. Educators need to become aware of the value of community and to articulate how this sense of community can be nurtured and sustained in a variety of learning environments, especially online. Furthermore, “community is built upon what activities people do together instead of being based on

geographical location” (Wellman, as cited in Rovai, 2002, p. 199), which is difficult for many schools, seminaries, and schools of theology to digest, especially those for which community is based on a geographical location. Reimagining community, not location-based but virtual, is challenging; the key is to visualize and understand possible models for building and sustaining online community.

As the idea of community, especially for religious communities, has developed over the centuries, McMillan and Chavis (1986) offer one recent definition of community: a sense of community is “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). As there are many definitions of community over time, there are various expectations of members in the community. This is why educators need to delve into this definition to become aware and articulate an idea of the sense of community that works for them and their community. They have to dissect it and examine its constitutive parts: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, shared events and emotional connections. These five factors are not isolated elements, but constitutive parts of community. As the term has evolved over time and has been defined by multiple authors, it has been used to describe a number of adult-learning community models. In essence, this sense of community is vital to understand the process by which instructors and learners become a community of learners.

### **Learning Communities and Wisdom Communities: Places of Finding your Voice**

In articulating, dissecting and examining the definition of community over time, theorists and educators have termed various models of community, especially, learning communities and wisdom communities. Fulton and Riel (1999) use the term learning community and define it as “a group of individuals who are interested in a common topic or area and who engage in knowledge-related transactions as well as transformations within it” (pp. 8-10). Snyder (2009) goes on to state that, “online learning communities can help students in distance education programs feel more connected to their professors and classmates” (p. 49). The experience of a transformational learning community from the perspective of students was explored by Dirx and Dang (2009).

Dirx & Dang (2009) in a recent case study feature “Larry” and 24 other workers laid off from their factory jobs. This case study chronicles how these laid off workers enter a community college program to learn new skills with the goal of obtaining a new job. Larry and others have not been in a classroom in a very long time; so, when they were in class for the very first time, they were very scared. But as they worked hard the first several weeks of the program, they got over their initial shock of being laid off and met others in the same situation; they knew they were not alone in the journey. They got over their fear of failing and entered into the program beginning to find their voice and challenge one another including the instructors. They found their voice and purpose. They reclaimed their identity; where before, their purpose and identity had centered around their work. When this was taken away from them, they were lost, but now they are found. Dirx & Dang realized that at the end of the 16 week program, participants felt “a sense of *communitas*,” an intense sense of solidarity and togetherness. It represents a leveling of social status within the group, providing members with an opportunity to explore new social roles or self-identities. The cohort, as a container for this sense of *communitas*, significantly contributed to the workers’ ability to entertain and engage a learner identity” (Dirx & Dang, 2009, p. 111).

Another container of *communitas* is the wisdom community. The wisdom community model is used by Aquinas Institute of Theology in which they form a sense of *communitas* in their doctoral program in preaching. As Thomas Esselman (2004) describes the theological element of the wisdom communities of learning is unique because of the locus in a theological context. In *Pedagogy of the Online Wisdom Community*, he states (2004) the ultimate purpose of “theological education is wisdom, that deeper kind of learning that takes place through participation in ... a wisdom community. In the theological setting, wisdom involves the transformation of the person, a dynamic process that unites heart and mind in a holistic movement toward maturity in discipleship” (p. 164). This transformation is not done in solitude; Esselman (2004) continues, “no one prepares for ministry alone, that intellectual, ministerial, and spiritual transformation always take place in the context of community (p. 164).

### **AIT’s Online Wisdom Community: Finding your Preacher’s Voice**

AIT is owned and operated by the Province of St. Albert the Great based in Chicago, IL. This province is part of the worldwide Catholic Order of Preachers, with the international leader in Rome, Italy. In 2000, AIT transitioned to a cohort-based hybrid doctoral program, whereby students complete a major portion of their program online and other portions face to face. The faculty discovered a learning community is not solely on based on geographical location, but what the community does together online and partially face-to-face can create a wisdom community “which involves the transformation of the person, a dynamic process that unites heart and mind in a holistic movement toward maturity in discipleship” (Esselman, 2004, p. 164).

The students who participate in the D. Min. program at AIT are multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-cultural and interdenominational. The wisdom community is comprised of men and women of faith; some are ordained and others are lay students, but they bring all their diversity, lived wisdom and ministerial expertise to the learning environment. Since AIT is operated by the Order of Preachers, it is only fitting that these students follow the wisdom community model, which is rooted in the “ratio” or plan of study for new members to the Order follows the same path of instruction and formation in the faith which leads to communion or discipleship in God. Through this transformative process, students experience, as with Dirx & Dang’s cohort, “a sense of *communitas*” and are able to take on new roles and the identity of a preacher. In the end, they find a voice to preach for the salvation of souls.

### **Methods**

Once again, the purpose of this paper is study this transformative process and to discuss the question, “How do ministerial adult learners experience wisdom community in a hybrid doctoral program in preaching?” To help answer this research question, a mixed study used to help answer this research question. An online survey was created to study alumni and current students of Aquinas’ doctoral program in ministry using Dr. Alfred Rovai’s (2002) Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to quantitatively measure their sense of community in a learning environment built on the “wisdom community” model. The survey The CCS scale is divided into two sub-scales: learning and connectedness, each of which ranges from 0 to 40, for a total score of 80. Qualitatively, the survey included a number of open-ended questions to gage their experience of the wisdom community model. Also, permission was sought to examine their threaded discussions within their various classes. The response rate for this survey was high; 65% of the alumni and current students responded which improves the trustworthiness of this

data set. Results of the survey showed student and alumni connectedness in their high scores in the CCS; their self-assessed learning reveals their deep integration, transformation and formation into a community of preachers.

The survey was sent to 74 people, current D. Min. students (38) and alumni (36). An initial email was sent to the participants asking them to complete their respective online survey through Survey Monkey. The 74 people were members of one of six cohorts. The current students were from cohort 2004, 2006, or 2008. Alumni represented cohorts 2000, 2002, or 2004. The first cohort that employed the hybrid format at Aquinas began in 2000, after which AIT began cohorts every two years. Thus, current students and alumni who graduated from the hybrid program at the time of the study were contacted with an individual email to participate. The raw data was categorized in light of cohort year, connectedness and learning. Means and standard deviations were determined. T-tests were also run to compare the cohorts.

## **Findings & Conclusions**

### **Quantitative Data**

In Rovai's (2002) original study of 375 subjects, he reported the following: Classroom Community (CC)  $M=56.62$ ,  $S.D.=12.30$ ; Connectedness Sub-Scale  $M=26.45$ ,  $S.D.=7.23$ ; and Learning Sub-Scale  $M=30.17$ ,  $S.D.=6.51$ . He also reported "female students possessed a higher classroom community ( $M=57.60$ ,  $S.D.=12.47$ ) than male students ( $M=54.73$ ,  $S.D.=11.79$ )" (p. 203). While in this particular study of 26 current students, males ( $M=63.7$ ,  $S.D.=11.3$ ) possessed a higher classroom community score than females ( $M=57.8$ ,  $S.D.=4.3$ ); this is the opposite of the trend Rovai reported.

In regards to the 20 alumni participants scored  $M=62.5$ ,  $S.D.=9.67$  in the overall CCS. The males scored overall  $M=63.6$ ,  $S.D.=9.3$  while the females scored lower with an overall score of  $M=55.7$ ,  $S.D.=11.0$ . Again, Rovai reported in his original study females possessed a higher classroom community scale than males, but again alumni males scored ( $M=63.6$ ) than alumni females ( $M=55.7$ ), although it is worth noting that the number of alumni females (3) was so small as to make descriptive statistics such as these less useful.

Also, Rovai in his original study never gave a rating scale for the CCS. The only conclusion this study can draw is that the overall score for the 22 current students who completely filled out the survey ( $M=61.5$ ) is higher than what Rovai reported in his original survey for the CCS ( $M=56.62$ ).

### **Qualitative Data**

A qualitative analysis was also performed on students' online discussions during the program and their responses to open-ended, online survey questions. After using thematic coding on these qualitative data sets, and drawing conclusions from the coding in light of the current literature, the analysis showed how online discussions and sharing of video-recorded preaching enabled geographically-distributed students to support one another in learning to prepare for and execute preaching more effectively. Furthermore, the results unearthed two competing views of covenant statements, which are an important tool for this community. These competing views exposed stages in individual students' communal development.

One alum stated in the discussion boards, “One of the things I most valued when I studied at Aquinas (long ago!) was learning more about the preaching traditions of my peers in ministry.” In another class, students had to post to a discussion board their denominational regulations on preaching; in essence, who can preach? Current Student 24, who is an ordained, Catholic male, stated he valued feminist preaching. He was changed by considering feminist preaching. He also commented, “Over the years, I have been [privileged] to hear excellent women preachers, our own cohort members included, that spoke to my soul on a level that no man [could] even consider.”

Lastly, one current student recalled one passionate remark at the start of their cohort and working together as a wisdom community: “First meeting - Greg Heille – ‘You are now doctoral students, there will be no titles, no clerical dress. We are colleagues on a journey together. My name is Greg,’” This statement is representative of the leveling of the social status within the group, which provides members of the wisdom community with an opportunity to explore new social roles or self-identities. The cohort, as a container for this sense of *communitas*, significantly contributed to the students’ ability to entertain and engage a learner identity.

### **Discussion & Implications**

Many people still question the strengths of hybrid and online programs in adult education, but this paper demonstrates if it is designed and delivered well, a hybrid program can be highly valuable to D.Min. students and other adult learners in hybrid and online programs. This finding is in line with research carried out in other contexts by the U.S. Department of Education and Moore and Kearsley. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education did a metaanalysis and review of online learning and concluded, “Instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction” (p. XV).

Finally, understanding the concept and development of the learning community is essential to designing hybrid and online courses. Not many instructors understand how a learning community goes through cycles of high and low activity, as Wenger discusses, or takes time to overcome fear so that adult learners can eventually experience “a sense of *communitas*” and experience new social roles or self-identities, as Dirkx & Dang discuss. Some instructors focus on providing rich content through documents or online videos, asking students to consume this content followed by a quiz or essay. To some instructors, this is an online class, but this study questions whether students really learn in such a class.

Adult learners need time and guidance through these stages and development. Instructors need to understand what a learning community is, how it is formed and developed, and how it impacts learning outcomes. Rovai reminds us that what a community does together helps to create that community, and this does not have to take place in a physical location. Therefore, this paper highlights ways instructors or course designers can enhance the physicality in the online community experience, helping adult learners feel connected and thus have a high level of learning, as Rovai and his Classroom Community Scale uncovers. This new understanding provides deeper insight into the work that Rovai and others have contributed and offers evidence of the importance of fostering these important shared learning experiences online.

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