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FEATURE

**FAITH PRESENCE: HOW STUDENTS LIVE FAITH
IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM**

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Abstract. *With the increasing share of online learning in mainstream education systems around the world, there is no doubt that online learning has become a disruptive innovation in the current era. Even Christian schools, with their distinctively faith-integrated curriculum that aims to transform students' lives, are increasingly engaged in the new modality. However, Clayton Christensen, the guru of disruptive innovation, believes that changing people's lives is something hard for online learning to accomplish. Challenged by this argument, this paper attempts to answer the question: Is it possible to instill faith through online education? Course materials, discussion transcripts, and written interviews of students in three fully online classes in a Christian graduate school, were examined to find out if students experience faith presence in their classes. Results showed varying levels of faith presence in the three classes. Further observations and interviews revealed conditions for achieving faith presence in the online environment.*

Keywords: faith presence, online learning, integration of faith and learning, community of inquiry.

Introduction

Is it possible to instill faith through online education? Faith-learning integration has been the distinguishing mark of Christian education. "To transform student lives" or "to restore in man the image of his Maker" (White, 2002, p. 2), has been the battle-cry of many Christian schools. But how can this be accomplished if learning occurs from a distance?

Online learning, one of the latest innovations believed to disrupt traditional education, has taken many Christian schools by storm. However, the very nature of online education—which is distant and impersonal, seems to run counter to the needed context for faith development—which is personal and relationship-oriented. Thus, for Clayton Christensen, the “guru of disruptive innovation” (Camillus, Bidanda, & Mohan, 2017, p. 40), what online learning cannot do is to “truly personally transform their students into becoming better people on a one-by-one basis” (“Clayton Christensen,” 2013, para. 32). Does this mean that online learning is a failure in delivering Christian education?

This study is an attempt to examine if faith is experienced in actual online learning events, for it is when faith is exercised or lived that real faith can take place (Heb 10:38). This study is not about identifying integration strategies for online teaching, a topic that is already well discussed in the literature; rather, it focuses on the outcomes of integration, which this paper calls *faith presence*. The next section deals with the origins of this concept and how it can be examined. Qualitative research methods are then utilized to determine if faith presence exists in web-based interactions by students, and their report of faith enriching experiences in actual online classes.

Review of the Literature

The literature on faith is vast but faith presence, as defined in this study, is a new concept. This review then focuses on the origins of the concept and its relation to faith and learning integration practices in Christian academic settings.

Faith Presence in the Community of Inquiry Model

Faith presence, as a construct, was first conceived as enrichment to the community of inquiry (CoI) approach to online education so that it could address the faith integration needs of Christian education (Casimiro, 2009). For the CoI model, an educational experience consists of three key elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). With the addition of faith presence, the resulting model is called the Integrated Community of Inquiry (ICoI) model (see Figure 1).

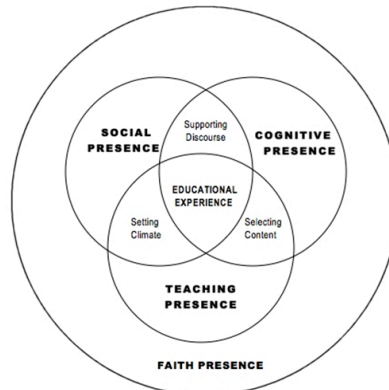


Figure 1: Integrated Community of Inquiry (ICoI) Model

As part of the ICoI model, faith presence shares with the CoI model's foundational belief that quality online learning happens within a critical community of learners where both personal meaning-making, and social interaction, are encouraged in the educational transaction. This model describes a quality educational experience as the “dynamic integration of content and context created and facilitated by a discipline expert and pedagogically competent teacher” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 4).

In a Christian view of learning, the concept of community, the connection of content and context, and the important role of the teacher are, likewise, emphasized (Jung, 2015; Osborne, 2010). This stems from the Christian belief that God designed human beings to be “relational, communicative, cultural, moral, expressive, meaning-makers, such that to deprive them of a relationship is to de-humanize” them (Roy, 2002, Community Is Fundamental section, para. 1). The biblical foundation of this belief is Gen 2:18, which says, “It is not good that man should be alone” (New King James Version). In a similar vein, the apostle Paul called the early Christian believers the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12) to describe the interrelationship among them.

Christians believe that the relational nature of humans was marred when they sinned. Modern humanity has experienced “alienation, fragmentation, sense of ‘homelessness,’ and the decline of community as a consequence of its ‘sense of the transcendent’” (Berger, as cited in Roy, 2002, What Is the Relationship Between Community and Learning? section, para. 3). From a Christian point of view, the goal of education is therefore “to restore in man the image of his Maker” (White, 2002, p. 2). In other words, the goal of education is “to restore connectedness and wholeness through a process of development that encompasses the physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional faculties” (Roy & Freed,

2003, p. 17). This task of restoration and transformation can be accomplished in Christian schools through what educators call “integration of faith and learning” (IFL).

Faith Presence and the Integration of Faith and Learning

The literature on IFL is replete with approaches and strategies so that what is left to be seen is their application in actual school contexts and the outcomes of such applications. As soon as Christian schools embraced online education, IFL strategies for the new modality grew accordingly. The unique characteristics of online learning, however, pose some challenges to true IFL. While IFL strategies can be identified, some questions remain unanswered; such as, how effective are IFL strategies in instilling faith among online students? How can teachers create community in the “faceless” environment of the online classroom? Teachers may post prayers and create online chapels, but how can they be sure that students are actually accessing them?

IFL can be considered effective if students’ faith is nurtured and affirmed (Jeffery, 2006). It means faith is being exercised in the learning context, and most importantly, students are led to a closer relationship with God, and ultimately, to “adopt the mind of Christ” (Clauerbaut, 2004, p. 135). This is faith presence in its fullest sense. Whereas IFL focuses on the philosophy, principles and methods of integration, faith presence focuses on its outcomes. There is faith presence when IFL is effectively implemented. The two constructs are, therefore, interrelated with faith presence being the outcome of integration.

Faith Presence Defined

In this paper, faith presence goes beyond mere alignment in terminology with the three presences in the CoI model. As noted earlier, it is the faith that comes as a result of faith-learning integration in an online class. Faith, according to the Bible, is “believing in something that is yet to happen and the evidence of things that are not seen” (Heb 11:1). Since God is not physically present in the world today, human beings believe in Him by faith. It is the strong force that draws them close to God, and a conviction that drives them to obey Him, no matter the cost.

It is, however, recognized that IFL in schools may not always lead to faith development or faith presence because of the complexity of the faith construct. Many factors (such as home, church, community, and personal spirituality, among others), influence faith (Clauerbaut, 2004; Gillespie, 1988). Perhaps, this is the reason why IFL literature focuses mainly on approaches and strategies to integration, rather than on its outcomes.

For the purpose of this study, faith presence means the existence of faith in a teaching-learning situation. Whatever forces or influences its development, when an academic activity gives room for faith to be exercised or expressed in class, faith presence exists. In this context, faith presence is defined as the exercise of faith in a teaching-learning situation as a result of faith-learning integration.

Faith Presence in the Classroom

Based on the foundational principles of both the CoI Model and IFL, faith presence and the resulting ICoI Model paint a more holistic view of the teaching-learning situation. The fundamental change in the goals of education occurs as follows:

- **Cognitive presence:** With faith presence, the goal for cognitive presence is not just to engage students in higher-order thinking. While maintaining a high level of cognitive engagement, every topic is approached within a Christian worldview, making the Bible the foundation of knowledge, with the highest goal of attaining the mind of Christ in each student (1 Cor 2:16).
- **Social presence:** With faith presence, social presence does not just focus on building a cohesive community of learners. It ultimately aims to build relationships that lead to the development of a faith community.
- **Teaching presence:** With faith presence, teachers do not merely facilitate or act as academic advisers. They set the learning context wherein students' faith develops to maturity by designing faith-enriching learning activities and by modeling Christ-like character.

The existence of faith presence in a teaching-learning situation can, therefore, be summed up in three categories (see Figure 2): *Christian worldview* (cognitive presence), *Faith community* (social presence), and *Christ-like character* (teaching presence).

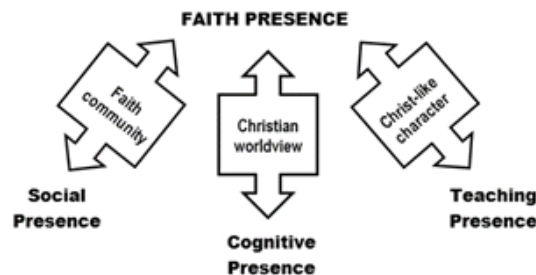


Figure 2: Faith presence categories

The following are sample questions that should be answered by every teacher to determine if faith presence indeed exists:

1. Do students approach the course topics within a Christian worldview? (Christian worldview)
2. Do they experience stronger bonds with classmates and teachers that can lead to the development of a faith community? (Faith community)
3. Do they practice faith or other biblical values in dealing with issues in life? (Christ-like character)
4. Do they engage in service, in accordance with the Great Commission (Matt 28: 19, 20)? (Christ-like character)
5. Most importantly, do they experience a closer relationship with God in class?

Note that the emphasis is no longer on the teacher's IFL strategies. Rather, the focus is now on how the goals of IFL are experienced by the students. Faith presence is lived faith, and this is best experienced when faith is fully integrated in the life of the students. How then is faith presence accomplished in an online classroom?

Christian Worldview. A Christian worldview is commonly exercised in the way content is presented in the online classroom. "How we view knowledge affects the type of content we choose to unfold and how we organize it" (van Brummelen, 1988, p. 87). A Christian worldview is defined as a way of seeing the world from the biblical standpoint. It is not just a Christian perspective or a viewpoint from which the knowledge and events of the world are critiqued. A Christian view of knowledge "provides a standard of truth for taking an objective look at all knowledge claims, for assessing and critiquing them" (Harris, 2004, p. 31). In an online class, the Christian worldview is usually evident in the course content and class discussions.

Faith community. Faith can also grow when an active community exists. The development of this community happens when the instructor makes intentional efforts to foster relationships in an online class until a level of trust emerges that allows a deeper community of faith to emerge (Osborne, 2010). An active community develops in interactive settings. Thus, in designing online coursework, Osborne emphasizes the importance of requiring participation in class discussions, because if discussion questions are "crafted appropriately (that is, open-ended and inviting a discussion that furthers the understanding of a Christian worldview)," course participants are enabled to "interact in a manner that is conducive to the establishment and fostering a community of faith" (p. 220).

Christ-like character. The teacher's role in setting the context of the teaching and learning situation, so that faith integration can happen, cannot be overestimated. The way the teacher designs learning activities and models Christ in dealing with the students, can lead to the development of a Christ-like character in them, which is a life of faith (Jung, 2015). Successful faith integration can then happen when teachers recognize their calling as both spiritual and intellectual (Clauerbaut, 2004).

To observe faith, however, is a daunting task, for God alone can see it. A person may have an estimate of his or her own level of faith in God, but this may be subject to limitations, depending on circumstances surrounding the situation where faith is exercised. How then do we know that a person is exercising faith, particularly at a distance? How can we ascertain if our faith integration efforts are indeed accomplishing their purpose?

The Faith Integrated Profile

David Miller's theoretical model (Princeton University, 2017), called The Integration Profile (TIP), is an attempt to measure manifestations of faith in people within an organization. Originally designed for the workplace, it uses "a valid and reliable instrument to enable individuals to discover their faith and work integration preferences and patterns" (para. 3). The model has four primary types of how people naturally manifest or live out faith at work, namely: Enrichment, Ethics, Experience, and Expression. It also has a fifth type: the Non-Integrator- which refers to those who do not integrate faith and work. All of the four E's are considered equally valid and not one is better or worse than the other. The four E's are defined briefly as follows:

Enrichment. The Enrichment type places high value on the way religion, spirituality, and/or consciousness, enriches one's work life as the primary manifestation of integrating faith and work. The Enrichment Type has different motivators and can be observed in different ways. The motivators are: "drawing strength and comfort for work; coping with pressures and problems at work; and finding professional wisdom and personal growth through work" (Enrichment section, para. 1).

Ethics. The Ethics type places high value on attention to ethical concerns as the primary manifestation of integrating faith and work. For this type, one's faith or spirituality guides, compels, and/or inspires him or her to take ethical actions. The Ethics type frequently sees faith as a source for ethical standards and a guide for behavior. These people are shaped and informed by scriptural teachings, commandments, rules, narratives, parables, and wisdom literature as a motivation for their decisions and actions.

Experience. The Experience type places high value on how they experience their work, as the primary manifestation of integrating their faith and work. The motivators of the Experience type are a search for meaning, purpose, and value in the work itself.

Expression. The Expression type places high value on the ability to express their faith/spirituality or worldview to others as their primary manifestation of faith and work. This expression manifests itself with different purposes and in different ways. The purposes are threefold: to persuade others to join their faith tradition or worldview; as a response to religious obligation; or freedom of expression (Princeton University, 2017).

It can be observed that the four E's of the TIP model are rather generic and may be used in other contexts. In teaching-learning contexts, students may also draw strength or inspiration from their faith (enrichment), use their faith to guide their ethical decisions (ethics), share experiences to show how God is leading them (experience), or simply express their Christian perspectives, worldviews, or beliefs on topics being discussed in class (expression). It is for this reason that I chose this model for the purpose of this study. As conceived originally by Miller, these four E's are mere manifestations of faith, never a measure of one's faith (Miller & Ewest, 2012). Logically, when faith is manifested in a classroom situation, there is faith presence.

Methodology

Faith is a construct that cannot be seen or measured (Henshaw, 2006). It is mainly observed through its manifestations (Miller & Ewest, 2012), with the assumption that such acts are evidences of a person's faith. It is for this reason that this study employed qualitative research methods in observing faith presence in the online classroom. This section describes the steps used in this study.

Research Design

This study examined the extent of faith presence in an online class through a combination of documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and the survey method through open-ended interviews. This combination of research methods allowed for the examination of possible manifestations of faith presence in an online class, as can be observed in course documents, the resulting class discussions, and personal impact on students' faith. Using multiple methods and data sources not only strengthens the credibility of a qualitative study, but also allows for the triangulation of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As the name implies, documentary analysis makes use of available documents pertinent to understanding the phenomenon being studied (Bowen, 2009). Since course materials and interactions in fully online classes are archived in learning

management systems, whatever happened in the class can still be viewed even after the class is over. The researcher can then look into the course content and teacher-prepared learning activities to determine how faith is integrated in instruction.

Discourse analysis, on the other hand, makes use of the interactions among course participants to examine how faith is expressed in class. At the core of a computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) is the investigation of online behavior grounded in empirical, textual observations of logs of verbal interactions in an online environment. CMDA enables the examination of broad social and psychological issues, including those that would otherwise be “intractable to empirical analysis [like faith presence], with fine-grained empirical rigor” (Herring, 2004, p. 2).

Supplementing documentary and discourse analyses are open-ended interviews to determine if faith is indeed experienced by the participants as a result of taking online classes. The use of open-ended interviews allows the researcher to extract “in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 14), thereby, enriching the observations made through documentary and discourse analyses.

Sampling and Research Setting

The cases of this study consisted of three fully online graduate-level classes, purposively selected among the courses offered in one higher education institution. The courses were part of the regular offerings of the school and were developed prior to this study and not for this study. The classes were chosen on the basis of their (a) implementation of faith and learning integration, (b) class size, and (c) representation of the three different fields of study offered in the institution. These distinctions were made because class size can have an influence in community building, which supports faith development (Osborne, 2010). Including courses from each of the three fields of study can reveal discipline-specific manifestations of faith. Theology courses were excluded from the study in order to focus more on personal faith expressions than on purely academic discourse about faith. As a result of the sampling process, a class was chosen from each of the areas of study (business, education, and health), with 6, 8, and 7 graduate students, respectively. Additionally, 16 online students were interviewed to corroborate data from the other sources.

Data Collection and Analysis

The three classes were examined throughout the two-month duration of the course and were treated both as separate cases and combined. For documentary analysis, the course content, devotional sections, and the type of discussion

questions were coded and analyzed in terms of existence (or absence) of faith integration. Then, all discussion forums were subjected to a discourse analysis using the four E's of the TIP model, with a fifth E being added to refer to Empty or no integration. This corresponds to Miller's fifth type, the Non-Integrator. Whenever several categories were used in a forum post, the dominating tone was determined and categorized as such.

The extent of IFL in the observed classes and the resulting class interactions were the basis for further observations. This was done to see the possible interaction of faith-integration practices and the manifestations of faith in the students' forum postings, which could lead to the discovery of possible factors or practices that result in greater faith presence in an online environment.

Recognizing the complexity of the faith construct, manifestations of faith in class discussions may not provide enough information on the impact of the classes on students' faith. Besides, the existence of a community, which is considered a contextual support for faith development (Jung, 2015; Osborne, 2010), may not be readily observed in such interactions. Hence, a short survey was conducted. It included some open-ended questions in order to get a more direct feel of the students' thoughts about their spiritual experiences in the online classes.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed, particularly in terms of participant safety, through voluntary participation and anonymity. The survey was conducted independent of the academic departments of the respondent institution to minimize possible academic, psychological, or relational harm that could result from participating in this study. Because the survey was conducted electronically and in written format, researcher's influence on student respondents was minimized. It must, however, be understood that interpretations of the data may be influenced by the researcher's Christian background.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented in the sequence used in analyzing the data. Discussed first are the results of the documentary analysis, followed by discourse analysis, and then the outcomes of further observations that are meant to examine the interaction of the two analyses. Finally, results of the open-ended student interviews are presented to see if they concur with the results of the previous analyses and observations.

Faith Presence in Course Content and Design

Documentary analysis was conducted to determine faith presence in teacher-prepared course materials. The three courses considered for this study consisted of eight weekly modules, taught in two months. For the purpose of this study, three features of the courses were subjected to documentary analysis, namely, the

course content, the devotional sections, and the teacher-prepared discussion questions in the forum area.

Course Content. The content of all three courses was based on purely technical and academic textbooks, devoid of any Christian perspective. The teachers prepared a content page to supplement the textbook and to serve as a reading guide for the students. In these content pages, the three courses varied. The education course dedicated the first module to give the course a Christian perspective. The health course showed some Christian perspective in three of the eight content pages, but they were not deemed substantial enough to make a major difference in approaching the topics. The business course simply used the supplementary content page as a study guide or summary page for the students to understand the textbook better.

Devotional Section. All three courses had a devotional section in each module, but again they varied in the way they were designed. The devotional section of the education course consisted of a Bible text, a story or message that illustrated the text, followed by a devotional forum where students shared reflections on the devotional message. All its 8 students were obviously active in these discussions as they had almost 26 posts per student, reaching a total of 206 posts during the 8 weeks of study.

The health course also had a story or message as its devotional in all its eight modules, although three of them did not refer to any biblical passage. A devotional forum was also utilized so that students could interact on the spiritual message, but only five of the eight modules had interactions. The participation of the 7 students, however, was minimal, with only about 6 posts per student, recording a total of only 45 comments or reflections on the devotional forum in 8 weeks.

The devotional section of the business course was different. It contained a few quotations from both secular and religious authors that had a direct bearing on the topics. There were no devotional forums, so no reflections were observed. It was not clear whether the quotations made an impact on the students.

Discussion Questions. The discussion questions prepared by the teachers were classified into three categories: IFL, if they called for faith integration; Academic, if the question was purely academic; and Acad/IFL, if the question was academic but included faith integration. As can be seen in Table 1 below, results of the analysis showed that the three courses varied, mainly due to the presence or absence of a devotional forum. There were also attempts at integrating faith in the discussion of the academic disciplines, as can be seen in the combined Acad/IFL column, but it is noticeable that almost all discussion questions in the business course were purely academic in nature.

Table 1
Type of Discussion Questions

Online classes	Type of discussion questions			Total
	IFL	Acad/IFL	Academic	
Education	9 (29.0%)	5 (16.1%)	17 (54.8%)	31
Health	5 (21.7%)	2 (8.7%)	16 (69.6%)	23
Business	0 (0%)	1 (4.3%)	22 (95.7%)	23

The discussion questions were prepared mainly to guide the discussion on the weekly topic. The academic nature of the courses necessitated the use of questions that were purely academic. However, when the course is approached in a Christian perspective, there can still be faith presence in the resulting interactions. Hence, to account for faith presence in the interactions that transpired in the courses, a discourse analysis of the discussion forums was conducted. This is the focus of the next section.

Faith Presence in Class Interactions

All the discussion forums of the three courses were subjected to a discourse analysis, with a focus on the following questions: (1) What is the extent of faith presence in the three online courses? (2) How is faith manifested in the conversations? These questions are dealt with in the discussion below.

Extent of Faith Presence. The actual status of a person's faith cannot be seen; but, manifestations of faith can be observed in the way people express their thoughts in online discussions. All the 1,410 discussion posts generated by the three courses were categorized whether they showed faith presence or not. A post showed faith presence if any of the 4 E's of faith integration of the TIP model was practiced. Posts without faith presence, classified as Empty or Non-integrator, were those that showed no expressions of faith or were purely academic.

As can be seen in Table 2, the majority of the discussion posts in the three courses were without faith presence. This is not surprising since the courses were highly academic or technical in nature. However, it was noticeable how the courses varied in the percent of posts that showed faith presence. It appears that one-third (33.4%) or one out of every three responses by course participants in the education course was faith-related, a mark that could be considered high enough, considering that the course is not about religion.

Table 2
Extent of Faith Presence

Online classes	Enrolled Students	Total Posts	Posts without Faith Presence	Posts with Faith Presence
Education	8	826	550 (66.6%)	276 (33.4%)
Health	7	379	303 (79.9%)	76 (20.1%)
Business	6	205	179 (87.3%)	26 (12.7%)

Table 3
Manifestations of Faith Presence

Online classes	Enrichment	Ethics	Experience	Expression	Posts with Faith Presence
Education	102	72	24	78	276
Health	17	9	5	45	76
Business	6	9	0	11	26
Total	125 (33.1%)	90 (23.8%)	29 (7.7%)	134 (35.4%)	378

Manifestations of Faith Presence. In determining how faith is expressed by course participants, the discussion posts that showed faith presence were categorized using the four E's of the TIP model. As Table 3 shows, 35.4% of these posts were on the Expression level, which means that students expressed their Christian perspective on the course topics. As noted above, the courses studied were non-theological in nature to be able to observe the presence of Christian perspectives more clearly.

Following closely, at 33.1%, is the Enrichment type of posts, wherein course participants openly express their praises to God, meditate or reflect on His goodness, or simply wish others God's blessings in which to draw strength and comfort in dealing with issues in life. Faith presence in dealing with ethical concerns follows in the third place (23.8%). This was observed in discussions where students were making decisions on right or wrong conduct, and faith was evident as the basis for ethical standards and guide for behavior. Discussions involving the application of biblical values were also included in this section.

It was, however, observed that the online students were not comfortable in sharing personal experiences with God, as shown by the low percentage of Experience type of posts (7.7%). It appears that the distance factor in online education still affects the extent of openness among online students.

Confirmatory Observations

The wide variation in faith presence in the courses examined—documentary and discourse analyses, called for further exploration as to why the three cases differed notably. Answering this question could shed light on the factors or practices that lead to effective faith integration and possibly assist in understanding the dynamics of faith presence in online learning. Here were some observations:

1. The design of the courses' devotional sections appears to be of prime importance in ensuring faith presence in online courses. The courses examined showed the contrast between an interactive and a read-only devotional. Obviously, an interactive devotional allows personal reflections and ample opportunities for students to express their faith. On the other hand, being an online course, there is no assurance that a read-only devotional message is actually accessed by the students; hence, its impact on their spiritual lives cannot be ascertained.
2. Faith presence is possible in topics that are purely academic if discussions intentionally call for Christian worldview. This discussion question, taken from the health course, is an illustration of this point:
In rich countries, the hunger for God and eternal life, as we Christians see it, tends to diminish dramatically with the increase in the standard of living. Look at the list of factors in Yassi (pages 146-150). In your opinion, what changes regarding risk perception take place as the country gets rich? Do you see any parallels here concerning the danger of losing eternal life?
3. When secular course content is written with a Christian worldview, there is more chance for the students to also view the course in this perspective, thus enriching faith presence in their discussions. This is evidenced in the higher percentage of faith-integrated posts (50%) in the first module of Course 1.
4. Even when the course content is written without Christian perspective, faith integration can still happen if course facilitators model or lead the discussions in this direction. This is shown in the existence of faith-related posts in purely academic topics.
5. Students' spirituality cannot be hidden in the way they express their thoughts. Even when the course content and discussion questions were written without faith integration, some students could not be prevented from expressing their spiritual views on the topics at hand.
6. One major finding of the discourse analysis is that online students appeared reluctant to share personal faith-related experiences online. With only about 8% of the posts in the Experience category (compared to 35%, 33%, and 24% for the other three E's), the students seemed to prefer the types of faith

manifestations that do not require opening themselves up. More posts were expressed in terms of *what should be done* (Expressions) rather than on *what I have done* (Experiences), thereby affecting the strength of the message's impact on others.

This result could have an implication on the strength of the online community, if at all present, in the classes observed. This result confirms the commonly held belief that online education lacks the personal touch that can help form bonds among students. It appears that the distance factor in online education still affects the extent of closeness among them.

Further examination of the devotional forums of the three courses, revealed that almost 50% of the questions posed by the teachers, were calling for personal experiences. However, during the discourse analysis, many of the responses to these questions were classified as Enrichment or Expressions of faith because the experiences shared were not directly related to personal faith.

What Students Say

To shed more light on connectedness and faith present in the online classrooms, follow-up written interviews were conducted. Interviews can verify if what was observed was what the students actually experienced. The students were asked questions on (a) the strength of their relationship with God after taking some online classes, (b) the development of stronger bonds with classmates, which can be likened to those of a faith community, and (c) ways to improve faith presence in online courses and in other relationships within the institution

Relationship with God. Since having relationship with God among students is the primary goal of Christian education (Knight, 2016), it is heartening to note that 10 of the 15 who responded to the question reported that they had a stronger relationship with God after taking the online classes. Three respondents said "Somewhat," while 2 said "No."

Experiencing faith community. Of the 16 students who responded to the second question, 10 were positive that they experienced the existence of a faith community in class; 3 were not sure; while the other 3 said *No*. Among those who responded *Yes*, one gave the following explanation:

. . . even non-Christians [sic] meet a lot and learn about Jesus. I have friends whom I still interact with on other private platforms whom I met online during classes. These friends share a lot of encouragement and strengthening my faith in God, and we share a lot when we chat. (Respondent 2)

However, two who did not agree explained that,

As it is an online class, everyone can be hypocritical as you don't know if in reality they practice what they preach.... (Respondent #5)

I think in most classes, it is a beginning activity that's not connected with other things. As a teacher myself, though, total integration is really hard, I think. (Respondent #11)

What then could be the implication of this result in the development of a community, which is an important support for faith presence? With 10 of the 16 respondents agreeing to have stronger bonds with classmates, it is not bad. However, with such a small sampling of interviewees, will this still be true if there were more students? This remains to be seen.

Improving Faith Presence. When the respondents were asked how faith presence could be improved in their classes, the dominating theme centered on the pivotal role of the teachers in influencing success or failure of faith integration. Here are some of the responses:

Given that the nature of the online community is somewhat impersonal, I suggest that teachers should intentionally find creative ways to be able to bridge and connect with students, and give the online learning process a more personal touch. (Respondent #6)

Yes, teachers making effort to integrate faith in learning class [sic]. But hopefully, teachers will also spend their spare time to reach out to students and ask how they are doing in the lesson. (Respondent #17)

Maybe it's just a reminder for us as God's children, to show kindness, having unity, and communication with one another. If possible, teachers should be reaching out to each online student whenever they feel to do so. In this way, they are showing concern about what is happening to them each day. (Respondent #18)

Indeed, the importance of teacher modelling cannot be ignored. As Jung (2015) said, “Students learn more when they believe that their professors care about their learning, and students are more engaged in their own spiritual transformation when they believe that their professors value transformation” (p. 60).

The other suggestion that was given for improving faith presence, pertained to the inclusion of more spiritual activities in the classes, such as:

Consistent chapel forum, Integration of Bible verses in the subject matter (Respondent #1)

Conducting a continuous Bible study group or online interactive forum. Preferably, 3 times a week for people to meet a pastor and learn a couple of

new things about God. It should accommodate both Christians and non-Christians. (Respondent #2)

(1) Conducting more video conferences in which professors pray with and for the students, not merely to open the conference . . . (2) Encourage prayer partnership between the students. Once or maybe twice in the course, students can video conference just to pray for each other. Maybe a name can be given to each student and they should be encouraged to pray for that classmate) . . . (Respondent #8)

The voices of the online students were clear enough to highlight the importance of intentionality in integrating faith in online classes. Aside from active teacher modeling, spiritual activities have to be created for the students to experience faith presence. This parallels the results of Yacapsin's (2014) research that showed 82% of the surveyed graduate students preferring more faith integration activities in online classes.

Conclusion

Going back to the main question of this study: is it possible to instill faith through online education? As can be seen from the results, clearly it is possible. It is evident from the documentary and discourse analyses and follow up written interviews that faith presence can happen online. It may not be strong, but it does exist. However, it was evident that courses vary in terms of faith presence, depending on such factors as (1) design of the devotional sections of the class (read-only or interactive); (2) the way course content is presented (Christian perspective or not); (3) outcomes called for in the discussion questions (faith-integrated or not); (4) teacher facilitation (directing to Christian view of topics); and (5) students' spirituality (expressing Christian views freely).

However, the impersonal nature of web-based communication technologies, still affects relationships among online students. It was evident that more posts were made in terms of *what should be done* (Expressions) rather than on *what has been done* (Experiences). This could have some implications on the strength of the online community in the classes observed. However, even with this seeming lack of personal touch among online students, they are still positive that teacher presence and spiritual activities can enhance faith presence in online classes.

Since the findings of this study are based on a relatively small number of respondent, there is a need to replicate this study in a larger number. This can be the subject of further research.

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