How Learning Greek Online Can Be More Successful than Face-to-Face Instruction

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I have a confession to make. For the longest time I have approached distance learning as the second best way to teach. I thought of it as a necessary evil in order to deliver theological education to those who could not receive instruction through the traditional face-to-face (hence F2F) classroom. Consequently, I approached teaching online as an effort to approximate the F2F experience but feeling that no matter what I do, I'll always fall short of the "real thing."

I have since changed my mind. In my experience designing and implementing an online course to teach Biblical Greek for seminary students, I have discovered that there are principles and practices which do more than simply approximate the F2F experience—they surpass it.

So what practices in the F2F setting can and should be approximated online? Here are two quick suggestions:

1) Create instructional videos as a means for students to receive course content. There are no short cuts to teaching the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of any language. Over the course of one summer, I developed over 80 instructional videos of approximately 7-10 minutes each to cover the entire scope of beginning Greek grammar. Across two semesters, students will watch me on YouTube explain the pronunciation scheme of the Greek alphabet, read the biblical text out loud, and then address nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech. The instructional videos

are the backbone to the content of the course.

2) Have students write out their homework assignments in a "messy" way. The textbook I use for the course is William Mounce's *The Basics of Biblical Greek*. I ask students to work through the homework exercises by hand since no electronic version of the Greek workbook is currently available by the publisher. Students do the work in a "messy" way: they scribble notes, circle words, draw arrows, cross out and self-correct their assignments. Then they scan their work and upload it as a PDF onto the course management system (hence CMS) for grading. The "messy" way of completing the homework adds a tactile, motor-memory component to learning that many find helpful. It is worth trying to approximate this online as much as possible.

When, or if, an electronic version of the workbook exercises becomes available from publishers, students can easily use an iPad or other tablet device plus stylus to approximate the "messy" by-hand learning experience.

Now here are two methods of online instruction that I think supersede the F2F experience:

1) Assign audio and video recording exercises to students to upload for instructor review. Currently I am teaching Greek online and on campus. To my surprise, I have found that, overall, my online students read biblical Greek out loud better than the on-campus students.

In the on-campus classroom, we practice pronouncing Greek during the first weeks of the course by reading 1 John 1 out loud. Students take turns reading a verse and we make the rounds until we corporately finish the whole text.

For the online course, students don't take turns reading just a few verses of 1 John 1. They have to read large sections of it on their own, record their reading, and upload it onto the CMS for me to grade. It takes time, but I listen to their recordings and write out my comments, or make my own recording, to send back to them so they can adjust their pronunciation. Every week, online students complete an A/V recording assignment but the on-campus class does not. As a result, the former read Greek better.

2) Form student-to-student cohorts. I cannot take credit for what follows. On their own, my online students formed a Facebook group where they exchange best study techniques, commiserate about the difficulties of the language, answer questions for one another, and share resources.

While on-campus students also form study groups, these are typically much smaller in size, meet less frequently, and do not involve the entire class. The Facebook group invites the entire class to participate and they do. The level of collaboration is much more intense.

I may even suggest to the on-campus students that they form online cohorts. Sometimes commuters don't have access to study groups. Forming a Facebook cohort would allow them to join.

These are just a few suggestions I offer as I stumble my way through teaching Greek online. I have been just as much a learner as an instructor in this journey. The pedagogical discoveries have been exhilarating!

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