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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Let's Start at the Very Beginning

Carolyn A. Wright, *Aquinas Institute of Theology*

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One of my favorite movies growing up was the *The Sound of Music*. I loved—and still love—the opening scene: the vast panoramic of Julie Andrews, arms outstretched, as Maria, belting at the top of her lungs: “The hills are alive with the sound of music!” Each song and every word from the film is etched in my memory!

Perhaps you, too, can recall the scene where Maria teaches the children to sing: “Let’s start at the very beginning; a very good place to start. When you read you begin with A-B-C. When you sing you begin with Do-Re-Mi, Do-Re-Mi. The first three notes just happen to be Do-Re-Mi, Do-Re-Mi, Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Te-Do!” By the end of the film, the whole family has mastered the art of singing and it leads, literally, to their freedom.

Mastery comes with a solid foundation and practice; with learning the basics, making mistakes, asking questions and correcting course. Mastery requires starting at the beginning—so that a certain freedom can surface once the basics are etched in our memories—even when learning online. As teachers, we need to provide an opportunity for students to master the basics not only of content, but also of the learning environment; to develop the thought and muscle

memory of working with technology. Only then can they set aside the concern of technology and truly enter into the freedom and joy of the online learning environment.

The greatest support I find for students in effective online teaching is to create a “Getting Started” module for every course I build. The language and idea of “Getting Started” is owed to the training module I completed with Quality Matters (<https://www.qualitymatters.org/>). I keep this language because it invites engagement with the full range of students, from neophyte to novice to expert in the online learning environment. All students are invited to review the basics. Some can be skimmed over; others perhaps not. The point is: there are many notes in this environment which need to become second nature and I teach them here.

A typical table of contents for such a module contains the following foundational elements: (Do) How to upload your picture to your account, (Re) How to forward school email to your personal email account, (Mi) A tour of the course site, (Fa) How to post an original thread and respond to peers in a discussion forum, (So) How to access privatized videos, (La) How to create a video using PowerPoint or Zoom, (Te) How to submit and retrieve assignments, (Do) How to access the library e-reserves and more. These foundational elements are delivered primarily via videos and PDF documents using screen images highlighted with step-by-step instructions.

These supports are made available the week before class begins and remain accessible for the entirety of the course. Students are encouraged to explore this module prior to the beginning of class to learn the A-B-Cs and Do-Re-Mis of the learning environment. I also provide an opportunity for a simple online discussion and assignment submission in advance of the course start to foster some familiarity and initial comfort with these processes.

This module is partially transferable from course to course, so I am not re-creating the wheel each course. Personalizing a few videos however—such as a tour of the course site—communicates my care for the current group of students.

As a practice, I meet with online students individually via Zoom one or two times a semester. During these sessions, I inquire what I could do better to support their transition to online learning and also how I can continue to support their learning in this environment. Last semester I learned—unfortunately late in the game—that a number of students never learned how to use the library’s database resources. This naturally impacted the quality of their research, learning and integration. As a result, moving forward, each course will contain a video showing how to do research using the vast electronic scholarly resources available through the library system. This will find its home in the “Getting Started” module.

So remember, while we grow beyond neophyte, novice and toward master teachers in the online environment, the neophyte online learner will always be with us. While students need the “Getting Started” module to varying degrees, let’s keep providing the basic A-B-Cs and Do-Re-Mis because there will always be need for some students to start at the very beginning so they can set aside the concern of technology and truly enter into the freedom and joy of the online learning environment.

<https://wabash.center/2018/11/lets-start-at-the-very-beginning/>