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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Thank you for Sharing: Gratitude in Online Learning

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Recently I was working with my IT colleague, Dr. Justin Barber, on a project to use machine learning to gather data about student experience in our hybrid classes from our LMS (Learning Management System). Big data comes to theological education! Our curriculum committee was testing a common perception that our distance students felt better about their experience in the classes after they had been together on campus. To test this assumption, we asked Justin to do something called “sentiment analysis” on the discussion forums to see how the emotional tenor of their interactions changed once they had been together in space and time.

Full disclosure: Justin is brilliant, and I often have no idea what AI (Artificial Intelligence) magic he has rendered. So, we always have to sit down for him to explain the results to me. Before performing the sentiment analysis, we summarized the aggregate posts of each discussion with three keywords to get a sense of the content of each discussion (excluding the common words that occur in almost every post like "the", "a", etc.). Then these three words would be analyzed before and after the campus visits to see if they were, on the whole, more positive after the students had been together.

The three word combinations were often just the topic for the week and two key related terms. Hilariously, a colleague's class in "Ancient and Emerging Practices" came up with the trio: church, tickle, sexuality. I had to explain to Justin who Phyllis Tickle was when he became concerned about what on earth was going on in that class. But as we scrolled through data from hundreds of forums over five years of data, week by week, the main word that showed up again and again was "thanks."

Thanks. As we scrolled, I was reminded of so many student posts that began with that word. "Thanks for sharing that story." "Thanks for bringing up that topic, because I was wondering about it, too." "Thanks for making that clearer, because when I read it I was totally confused." While the results of the sentiment analysis were largely insignificant, this moment of realization of the function of gratitude in our online classrooms has stuck with me. It drew together something in my lived experience, but it was still surprising how often that it made the top three. Thanks. Not only in classes where emotional intelligence and personal sharing is expected, such as pastoral care courses, but in history classes, Bible classes, comparative religion classes.

Many faculty fear a loss of relationality in online classes. They worry that peer-to-peer learning is diminished, that learning becomes a form of correspondence course between students and faculty. In my doctoral pedagogy class, students worry that conversations in online forums will mimic the trolling vitriol of Twitter comments. But here was dispassionate evidence that an attitude of respectful engagement was the overwhelming norm in all of our classes. In simple list form, we discovered over and over again the simple acknowledgement of indebtedness to another student: Thanks.

As Justin and I processed this surprising result, we talked about how some of this polite deference might be a reflection of the somewhat tenuous nature of online community. Perhaps in situations where relationships aren't reinforced by regular embodied interaction, a level of additional respect becomes a habitual marker of conversation in order to maintain connection and compensate for the way text doesn't communicate body language, tone, or attentiveness. More cynically, this profusion of thanks might be a signal of perfunctory niceness, something that both our majority white female student population and church-related vocation students are socialized to perform.

I like to think of this habit of gratitude as a way that students hold one another's stories and learnings as gift. The esteemed religious educator Dr. Anne Streaty Wimberly once led a retreat in a church that I later served as youth minister. Even years later, the young people in that community remembered her as the "thank you for sharing lady" because she had taught them to receive every word spoken into the circle as gift, which required verbalized gratitude. Opening up a laptop in a faraway city to re-enter a challenging class alone can be a difficult discipline, particularly for students who already have very busy lives. Finding colleagues there who hold your contributions with respect and gratitude makes that space more gracious and inviting. And so our students, without our prompting, learned together to say thanks.

<https://wabash.center/2019/11/thank-you-for-sharing-gratitude-in-online-learning/>