

Early Christianity On-line: e-text and e-learning in Theology Teaching [1]

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Index

- [e-learning and Student-centred Learning](#)
- [Patristics On-line](#)
- [The Searchable Bible](#)
- [A Historical Perspective on the Student as Resource Manager](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Bibliography](#)

Article

In amongst the general interest in 'e-learning' in terms of its ability to deliver courses and materials to students located away from university campuses there has been rather less focus on the ways in which student access to such electronic text resources will transform aspects of text-based learning. Some recent polemics have highlighted the point that e-learning potentially challenges traditional sources of authority in learning. Susan Blackmore has suggested that easy availability of information on the Internet presents problems insofar as it will make education less about putting information into heads and more about learning to 'navigate' resources (Millar 2001). Whether or not this is desirable or otherwise, it is doubtless correct to say that in the future IT will render it more necessary to account of a variety of methods of information management. Investment by institutions in IT is currently running in advance of identified need (Meek, *et al.* 1998) - a tendency broadly characteristic of patterns of investment in IT development in industry and society as a whole.^[2] It is not unreasonable to see this investment as somewhat messianic, insofar as it is often made without much hard evidence for its specific affects upon learning; it is also true that it is an investment which is transforming students rapidly into information managers with skills often not shared by their teachers. This 'Student-centred Learning' (SCL) is not an entirely unanticipated development; nor is it especially undesirable. Information itself is not necessarily subversive, nor is the current information revolution something which has come out of the blue.

The use of Information technology (IT) to access on-screen text (electronic text, or 'e-text') has, however, very considerable implications for the teaching of any subject which has a large text-base, such as theology/early Christian studies. The full impact of this revolution is only now beginning to be seen. Although the issues of student use of IT have been present since the mid-1980s, the increasing use of the World-wide Web (WWW) since 1994,

with the introduction of a user-friendly interface - as provided by Hyper-text Mark-up Language (HTML) and its successors - and investment of the education system in IT in general since the mid-1990s, has created a generation of students who are increasingly developing transferable skills of 'information management', which they are bringing even to humanities subjects.

The following paper, undertaken as part of a pump-priming project for the PRS Subject Centre, will attempt to explore some pedagogical issues which arise from the availability of searchable, on-line or downloadable, early Christian sources. Its emphasis will be upon the potential benefits for the student in use of e-text, in terms of the student's development as an 'information manager', in a modularised syllabus; this in partial contrast to the student's position with respect to curricula in which the student is perceived as a repository of received 'core' elements, absorbed in a progress model of learning. Two case studies are provided: of searching Patristic sources on-line and of searching a downloadable Bible.

1. e-learning and Student-centred Learning

Early Christian and Biblical studies has a large text corpus, mostly available in published editions which are frequently translated and much of it produced long enough ago to exist out of copyright. Much Christian material has been available through electronic media, such as CD-ROM, throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s. Since the advent of the WWW in 1994, considerable numbers of early Christian texts have been placed into this forum; and others placed into freely-available packages - such as searchable Bible texts - which may be easily downloaded from the WWW. Any student with access of a moderately powerful computer now has access to these machine-searchable resources in the public domain - though searchable *text* editions (such as the Chadwyck-Healey CD-ROM of *Patrologia Latina*, or the Brepols CD-ROM of *Corpus Christianorum*) remain, conversely, heavily limited in access by their cost.

The students' knowledge of IT is potentially equal to or greater than that of the lecturer and their use of on-line resources as a result is, to a great extent, unsusceptible to regulation in the teaching process. It thus may be well to begin with the acceptance that the use of IT by the student in studying e-text is inevitable and beyond the teacher's ability to regulate. This is important if responses to such use are to avoid the pitfalls of being either too unquestioningly positive, or too reactive to short-term change in student behaviour - without appreciating the long-term pedagogical trends which underpin IT development. There are some fundamental challenges posed by free access to textual and related data on-line. In most cases the spectrum of 'undesirable' use only extends the 'terrestrial' paradigms of such use of sources. Much information on the WWW is unreliable and its representative character unclear to the user. This has, however, always been the case with printed books. IT increases the range and the speed of use of such sources, however, and introduces an environment, the WWW, which has as its central tenant the provision of an unregulated exchange of information - itself a challenge to the authority of teachers and canonical bibliographies. Plagiarism is a problem where material may be quickly cut and pasted. Again the problem is essentially one of the speed of the activity and the range of material which is available.

2. Patristics On-line

When we turn to the subject area of early Christian and Biblical studies, the impression gained from being a WWW-user is that there is a remarkable amount of material on-line, concerning the early church in particular. Some of this is offered more or less altruistically, even by institutions which have a focused religious agenda. Wheaton College Illinois facilitated the placing of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translations on-line (www.ccel.org, at time of writing). The greater part of the Patristic corpus is thus steadily being made available on-line, at least in translation, for any use to which it may be put. Other sites provide similar services, often with a more obvious sectional or pro-active slant. Various western Orthodox churches have placed sources on-line as a resource for 'party' debates - though this frequently only affects the selection or presentation of sources, access still being free. The texts on these sites are mostly only in English. Apparatus - where provided at all - is often of a somewhat dated or eccentric character, as are the introductions to the texts. The criterion for inclusion is, most often, that the text be

in the public domain (in the USA, this is normally more than 70 years after publication). The criticisms which were levelled at some translations at the time of publication (mostly the turn of the twentieth century) are not addressed - for example that indelicate passages were omitted by some translators. These problems are compounded by the fact that marking of points of deletion and *variae lectiones* are often dispensed with in some cases in the process of mark-up for the WWW.

Ian Balfour (2000), in a recent article, has surveyed the on-line resources for Tertullian - one of the most controversial Patristic sources. Balfour's statistics are worth noting: they reveal that the material on-line is mostly in English and much of it, though plentiful in quantity, does not reflect the current *status quaestionum*.

Balfour took a sample using the search-engine **Google**, using the name Tertullian as his keyword. Out of the contents of the published bibliography, which he used as his control, only 3% of critical articles (as opposed to survey articles and digest material) had made their way online. Of the material which he surveyed: 446 pages contained text or translation of Tertullian; but of these 341 were from one translation, the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation; only 7 pages gave the Latin text. On secondary literature Balfour's criticism is, rightly, that his returns are very much unrepresentative of the body of work available in print. Only 3% of printed secondary material in his control bibliography is available online: none published prior to 1898, and little from recent periodical literature (Balfour 2000, 581-2). Whereas over 37% of Balfour's control bibliography of Tertullian scholarship is material published in German or Italian (and this figure would be higher if we considered only modern works); 90% of that appearing on the WWW is in English (Balfour 2000, 583). The activities of one non-specialist - though evidently critical and competent - enthusiast (the owner of www.tertullian.org) accounts for 71% (115 articles) of all original material on Tertullian. The centre of gravity of scholarly interest in a subject (for example, the material on Tertullian from the time of the Second Vatican Council: Balfour 2000, 582) can almost totally escape notice if it is not in English.

Balfour's analysis is mostly exemplary and I will only note that similar searches will reveal much the same pattern. A search for 'Clement of Rome', using the same search-engine (Google) revealed, out of 100 'hits', a similar pattern.

Text and translation (20% - mostly translation; cf. Balfour, 22.3%).

New Material (14%; cf. Balfour, 8%)

Old Material (18%)

Digest Material (24%)

Personal uses and use of name in Church dedications - e.g. the somewhat intriguing 'Clement of Rome singles club', Louisiana (10%; cf. Balfour, 6%)

Of 100 returns for 'Clement of Rome', 4 were in French, 1 in Greek and the rest in English. Curiously, none were in Italian or German - though other spellings might return more in this context. It may be a measure of the relative level of Patristic interest on the WWW resources that only 2 'hits' were references to Clement VIII, despite his association with such a pivotal event as the Council of Trent.

It is clear that the WWW, far from representing a free exchange of all information in general, brings only a narrow set of returns, often repeating the same information, and often difficult to assess in terms of its representative nature.

Some areas excluded by the WWW are probably not important for teaching. It is probably not desirable that students read widely in secondary literature published prior to 1898. From the point of view of teaching in a UK institution it may be unlikely that any but specialists would read secondary literature in Italian, though good Biblical and Patristic students might ideally be expected to use German sources. The Latin texts are a different matter, though increasingly these are not used by students anyway, even where readily available in libraries.

3. The Searchable Bible

Up to this point we have considered the WWW. Other tools must also be considered for their positive and negative impact. Let us consider one case study where we may measure the transition from on-paper searching to electronic

searching. One of the oldest (printed) 'search engines' available to the scholar has been the Biblical concordance (Danker 1970; O'Loughlin, 1999). Such texts have been commonly available to students of theology, as well as to ministers of religion. Machine-searchable Bibles, available gratis from a number of sites, greatly extend the range of this type of Bible-searching.

Printed Biblical concordances are often of quite ancient origin, frequently repellent in appearance and requiring one to be something of what would be described in computer-speak as a 'power-user' to gain maximum value out of them. Often concordances reflect 'received' priorities and are only with difficulty adaptable for use outside of the parameters within which they were developed. Whereas the concordance is often limited, typically, to three-letter phrases, words in a single text or some such structure, the electronic Bible text may be searched entirely by word, and in parallel on a split-screen (which greatly facilitates use of the English text to search original language text). It has the potential to greatly accelerate searching and to transcend the limitations of the individual concordance.

It is worth making a case-study of how one of these may be used by a student. A passage in the eighth-century Latin text *Nauigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* has tended to puzzle readers. St Brendan and his brethren landed on an island upon which there are giant sheep and wherein lives a steward.

Interrogabat quoque sanctus Brendanus illum quomodo potuissent oues esse tam magnae sicut ibi uisae sunt; erant enim maiores quam boues. Cui ille dixit: 'Nemo colligit lac de ouibus in hac insula nec hiems dstringit illas sed in pascuis semper commorantur die noctuque. Ideo maiores sunt hic quam in uestris regionibus'.

(Saint Brendan also questioned him on how the sheep could be so big there as, one could see, they were. They were indeed bigger than cattle. He replied: 'No one takes milk from the sheep in this island, nor does winter put any strain on them. They stay in the pastures always, day and night. As a consequence they are larger here than in the parts you come from.')

The tendency in the past has been to look to Classical literature for parallels. The Bible is another obvious source, however. A machine-search of the Online Bible, a simple searchable Bible programme with the AV, RSV, Vulgate (Clementine), Greek and Hebrew texts, turned up the following returns.

Milk: 47 references
Sheep: 189
Flock: c. 100

Searching the returns on 'milk', the smallest selection, identified the reference as likely being to 1 Corinthians 9-10:

1 Corinthians 9:7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

This was a favourite passage in 1 Corinthians for writers on monasticism. A search of similar keywords through the [online Patristics corpus](#) turns up the fact that it was discussed by Augustine in *De opere monachorum* IV. The intuitive student, without any knowledge of Latin, could turn up this citation: such intuition as might be already developed for using a keyword search for the library catalogue, or for certain types of information on the WWW, is all that would be required. [3]

These outcomes might have been accomplished with a printed concordance, or a dictionary of Biblical Greek used in reverse. The difference of such a search from the machine equivalent lies in the speed of the process, the ability to use the entire Biblical text at once and the simple ability to use Latin and English text together on the one screen.

Having acquired this identification, the passage still requires interpretation. Nonetheless, the clear implication here is that the student may obtain basic information more easily than previously. Much less user-knowledge is required to make such a search on-line than by making use of an old-fashioned Biblical concordance. All that are used are transferable skills of 'keyword' searching from other database systems. 'Transferability' of skills is an essentially desirable outcome of learning.

4. A Historical Perspective on the Student as Resource Manager

The student of theology has potentially been a 'resource manager' for most of the modern period. Searchable Biblical text - at least in select passages - has played a major role in pastoral theology; the need to locate apposite liturgical and ethical passages from such an extensive corpus of text led to the early development of extensive concordances and other mechanical aids in paper form. The 'flip-side' of this process has been the desire to control such knowledge. The challenge presented to doctrinal authority by persons with an unusually encyclopaedic knowledge of Biblical passages is a well-known phenomenon in the history of 'cults'. The student who can use Biblical or other religious text quickly and in terms of subject-searching clearly also may challenge such hierarchy of knowledge.

Some of the controls available to general humanities teachers have less often been available to teachers of New Testament Greek. In Classics, texts were produced with original language and glossary, but no translation; and in a controlled environment, such as a college library, it might be hard to obtain a translation - where one existed at all. This has been less the case with Biblical text, where all but rare apocrypha have been readily available in translation for over a century. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, students without a classical education were a common phenomenon in the priesthood of the Anglican church (e.g. Kirk-Smith 1998, 55, 67) Acceleration of clerical training inevitably saw students use concordances and texts in parallel as cribs to redress such shortfalls. These problems have been present in theology teaching for more than a century. It is the relative scale of SCL which has changed with IT.

It was with the use of library catalogues, put into the form of IT databases mostly in the 1980s, that most humanities students first encountered electronic 'search engines' and searchable bibliographical 'sets'.. Some unanticipated problems of information management immediately appeared with these new 'search engines'. Whereas students had previously mainly used works which appeared on their set reading, or which they might have encountered through a glance around the shelf-areas with which they were familiar, a simple machine search suddenly turned up sometimes hundreds of items - mainly books - which, previously overlooked, now might appear on a bibliography. Staff who had for years assumed older works would be overlooked by students now found themselves having to explain the problems with the theories of F. Max Muller, James Frazer and Jane Harrison to a new generation of students. As religious scholars prior to the modern era more often wrote books than they wrote periodical articles, frequently these books were what was turned-up by the machine-search and staff were confronted by a previously less common need to explain *why* older works and books were less apposite to the *status quaestionum* than more recent works, especially periodical literature.

The student thus eluded the usual controls on information and required to have it explained why some information was worth reading and some not. The teacher was required to communicate a method by which the student might discriminate between reading on a scale never encountered previously. The problems identified by Balfour are arguably only new species of the same problems. Our difficulty, as teachers, is to identify the perceived shortfalls of knowledge, especially pertaining to the representative character of knowledge, and explain these to the student.

Turning to the WWW, the existence of so much theological text and commentary on the WWW is perhaps symptomatic of theology's longer relationship with 'machine-searchable' text than that most other disciplines. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament were amongst the earliest resources in the Humanities to be made available in CD-ROM and this extends the tendency for the synoptic problem and *Quellenkritik* to encourage the production of 'searchable' text.

Conclusion

In general, the theology student's use of resources extends extant trends, to which, in an environment of 'student-centred learning', the teacher has no choice but to respond constructively. Students are, by virtue of the WWW, no longer dependent on the printed sources provided by the university; their use of resources is also not limited by previous controls, as well as constraints, upon library provision. In an environment in which most universities receive increasingly limited financial provision, this may be seen as a desirable development from the point of view of cost allocation. From a pedagogical view, however, it is increasingly seeing students turn to sources which exist in a largely unregulated environment.

The student of theology has to some degree long been trained in the use of resource management as much as in substantive knowledge. Hebrew and Greek New Testament studies were amongst the earliest to embrace computer-based text mark-up. The ability to transcend the parameters of received resource management represents a traditional subversive path within Christianity. Recent trends in 'alternative' Biblical studies have tended to focus on word- and code-based theories. All of these factors contribute to the extensive engagement of the theology student with on-line resources. The key event which changed the landscape of teaching was the advent of HTML mark-up in 1994, which brought a user-friendly interface, replacing CD-ROM and the pre-HTML Internet. The use of such resources, where they are readily available, is inevitable. The most important challenge is to identify the positive benefits of IT and adapt to these, rather than be seen to be fighting a rearguard action against our own institutions and their information services.

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Notes:

1. A version of this paper was presented in the form of a workshop at the PRS Subject Centre colloquium on e-Learning at Gregynog Conference Centre, Powys, in June 2001.
2. Some universities advertise the existence of IT ports in every dormitory room and, somewhat uncharacteristically in terms of normal resource provision, provide email and WWW access for students; in many cases without requiring them to use it for any purpose other than recreation.
3. How much we would assume the student to possess such intuition is arguable. Some students clearly do not arrive at university with any experience of systematically searching for information on the WWW; rather their experience is entirely of being a passive user of search engines which themselves determine what is or interest, or

'cool', on-line. Nonetheless, the intuitive use of IT is equally as likely to be a skill of a recent undergraduate as of a middle-aged academic.

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