

Bible Lands and Lifeways: Developing a Blended Course

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Abstract

How do you help students experience the geography and culture of the Bible, when you cannot take them on location? Dr. Ziese wanted to offer an online version of his Bible Lands and Lifeways course that would incorporate a variety of media, learning styles, and experiences of the course content.

The course combines videos shot on location, narrated multimedia presentations, interactive maps, atlas marking, student reading and writing, and Blackboard discussion board assignments. This mix is intended to help students explore the material using multiple senses.

This presentation will detail

- some of the design and development process,
- successes and failures in early delivery and how evaluation has improved the course,
- future plans for improvement.

Dream to Development

The geographical element plays a significant role within Biblical narratives. Biblical authors assume that their readers are familiar with the “lie of the land” and the sites in it. Statements suggesting that a feature, construction, or city exist “to this day” appeal to a common knowledge as testimony. Boundary lists, travel itineraries, and the detailing of battle tactics regularly include place names also issued without comment. Phrases such as “up to Jerusalem,” “down to Jericho,” or “across the Jordan” demonstrate sensitivity to matters of elevation or distance that one would expect of walkers, herders, or farmers. Even powerful ironies such as the description of a withering mountain, a wet Zion, or a green Aravah require an appreciation of the land’s climate by writer and reader alike.

Similarly, traditional technologies such as farming, shepherding, breadmaking, potting, metalworking, flintknapping, and housebuilding form an essential part of the background against which Biblical narratives are told. When it is realized that the environment provides

opportunities for personal subsistence as well as limitations—the “ceiling of possibility” —the advantage in linking the study of such lifeways to the study of land becomes clear. Put differently, in small-scale societies where resources are localized, the step from lands to lifeways is a short one.

The vision for Bible Lands and Lifeways was born in Palestine. A teaching sabbatical granted in 1996-1997 offered me the opportunity to live in a small highlands village north of Jerusalem. Office space and access to data were provided by the Palestinian Institute of Archaeology (PIA) on the campus of Birzeit University. This total immersion into the land, its people, languages, customs, and political struggles was profound and raised many questions. One question concerned the possibility of defining and using the dynamics of land as a grid through which the Biblical text could be interpreted. A further question asked how this could be effectively organized and taught to others.

The administration of the Cincinnati Bible College was open to development of these ideas and when I returned to the teaching regimen, a course was offered as a two hour elective. Some measure of success was achieved by organizing the “Heartland” of the Biblical narrative, chiefly, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, into a set of distinct regions. Schematic maps emphasizing key sites along lines of trade and transport were drawn with colored chalk on the chalkboard and dutifully copied in colored pencils by students. The drawing of these maps was augmented by PowerPoint presentations that emphasized the visualization of each region and its dynamics. In time, contact with other like-minded people resulted in the creation of a set of atlases to be used as textbooks. By this time the course had been upgraded to a three hour course and became a prerequisite for other courses in the area of Biblical Studies.

With its emphasis on fact acquisition, the choice to attempt offer Bible Lands and Lifeways in a distance education format seemed natural. What our administration did not predict was the resources of time and energy required to make such a move. Only after several false trails did the means and method become clear. Designers were hired, a graduate assistant tapped. The final piece was an institutional commitment to Blackboard that provided the platform from which e-learning could be launched.

Bible Lands and Lifeways continues to be a required course in our institution. Hundreds of students take the class annually either as a classroom experience or as a distance-ed experience. Overheads and colored pencils have been replaced with flash maps. Videos shot on location have been added. PowerPoint presentations have been replaced by **SMIL presentations in Real Player** that offer classroom-style lectures in audio as well as text formats. Online tests have been developed.

Obstacles to this development have been high and difficult. While course content has remained essentially the same, pedagogical tactics continue to be adjusted to meet the unique needs of e-classroom. This development loop, and the obstacles encountered only underlines the importance of a team approach to the development and delivery of this course. Paul Pennington and Jody Otte, among others, have helped make this vision a reality.

Technical Development

The original design took place before the explosion in drive space and memory size. In fact, we still have students with extremely low end machines (small drives, 64 Mb of RAM, etc). We decided to utilize Real Media for the video and audio since it required significantly less space than comparable Quicktime or Windows Media files. Video was captured and edited using Adobe Premiere and rendered as AVI files. Real Producer was then used to render the AVI into a Real Video file.

The most complex part of the development involved the narrated presentations. We decided to build the presentations using SMIL since it is a freely available standard (although free editors were not available). In order to build a presentation, Dr. Ziese's PowerPoint slides were saved as JPEG images.

He then went through the slides one at a time and recorded a narration using Sonic Foundry's *Acid Express*. These were saved as WAV files because the product did not allow saving to Real Audio (RA). Sonic Foundry's *Sound Forge* program was then used to convert each WAV file to an RA file for the presentation. An administrative assistant then transcribed each audio file into one Word document for the presentation. A specific code was used to identify each block of text with the RA file to which it corresponded. When the transcription was complete, a Word Macro was used to save each block as a separate Real Text (RT) file with appropriate naming and numbering to correspond to the image and audio files.

For the first few presentations, the developer (Paul) hand coded the SMIL programs in order to learn how it worked and to ensure the desired look and feel. For the rest he identified start, stop, and duration timecodes for each RA file and recorded them in an Excel file that also included a list of the JPEG files, RA files, and RT files. This spreadsheet formed the skeleton for the SMIL presentation. Paul wrote a Visual Basic routine that took each element from the Excel sheet and wrote the SMIL code for the entire presentation. This worked 90 percent of the time. Each presentation was then tested, and the code was modified where unique transitions were needed or where typos had led to incorrect sequencing. Instead of 3-4 hours for the first few presentations, the rest took about 45 minutes for recording the time sequences and files, less than 1 minute for the SMIL automated coding, and another 10 to 15 minutes for checking and polishing.

We hired a graduate student, who had some Flash experience, to create the interactive maps in Flash. The current maps sequence through the Mediterranean world (2 versions) and each of the regions in the Heartland. The maps do not incorporate random drilling which would be a nice addition for future versions. They simply sequence through the details in a way that mimics Dr. Ziese's presentation in class. Jody has been really good at identifying inconsistencies between the maps, and we recently worked through a complete edit of each one.

Technical Glitches

During the development and final compilation we did not have access to any Windows XP machines. The CD's were duplicated in December, just before Christmas. When the course began toward the end of January, we began receiving emails and calls from students who could not use portions of the software. Lectora is heavily dependent upon Java in some areas. Due to their lawsuit with Sun Microsystems, Microsoft chose to not include the Java Virtual Machine

with Windows XP. All of those new machines hit the market, just in time to cause several weeks of headaches and troubleshooting before we were able to get all of the students set up with the Virtual Machine.

Later in the year Real Networks came out with Real One Player to replace Real Player 8. Real Player 8 had a Playlist feature that allowed a student to navigate anywhere within the SMIL Multimedia presentations. That feature disappeared in Real One Player, so students were forced to simply watch the presentation in sequence, or start over. Real One Player tried to take over multimedia and even Internet browsing, so we continued to encourage use of Real Player 8. This will be addressed in the upcoming transition to MPEG and DVD.

Delivery and Improvements

With this demonstration of our software development, we have discussed how we decided to present the material to students, but we still need to discuss course implementation. With any distance education course, the question becomes, “How do I move the students through the material I have prepared?” In the classroom, this takes the shape of regularly scheduled meetings, during which key information and materials for the course can be distributed and discussed. A distance education course creates a challenge because we are incapable of gathering all of our students into one place to pass out such things as a course syllabus. With this comes the impossibility for class discussion, questions from students, opportunities for clarification, instructions for assignments, the submission of student papers, etc. Additionally, testing becomes a significant challenge. We will address each of these in turn.

In order to address the issues, we opted to use Blackboard. Essentially Blackboard serves as our replacement for the classroom. It allows us to overcome the absence of the physical classroom by providing us with virtual solutions to many of the problems created by this lack. Blackboard does not require knowledge of such mystical things as HTML tagging, JavaScript, or any other skills typically associated with website development, which is always a plus.

Course Logistics

One of the key components to our model of implementation of our online course is the use of a facilitator. We have chosen to use a facilitator in order to alleviate the burden of additional hours added to the professor’s load. Since all of the lectures are already present on the CD, employing a facilitator frees the professor to teach other courses. Instead of adding 3 hours to Dr. Ziese’s teaching load, we have maintained the number of hours in his course load. By using a graduate assistant, we are able to maintain the professor’s contact with the course through a supervisory role without requiring the day to day responsibilities of teaching an online course to his schedule. I also work closely with Dr. Ziese in making further developments in the course.

Course Initialization

The first question to be addressed is how students will get the information needed to start the course. In order to get the students to the website where we have our virtual classroom through Blackboard, we send out an e-mail to all of the students registered for the course, providing them with a user name and password and instructions to visit the site. This underscores the need to get an e-mail address from each student upon registration. Once the student logs in for the first time,

they are brought to an announcements page with instructions for beginning the course. These must be clear, and it is best if they are step by step instructions. An additional statement of how the course will progress is necessary, as many students may not have had experience with this type of course. Because Internet courses vary greatly from one to the next, even students who have taken an Internet course before will be wondering, “How is this course going to work?”
[Show slide of announcements page]

Once students are at our Blackboard site and they have something in front of them that tells them what they need to do get started with the course, they are ready to access the wealth of information that we have for them on the Blackboard site. What information is here?

- Course Syllabus
- Instructions for installing the software (The software contains instructions for using the software itself.)
- Assignments
- Information about grades and grading
- Technical information
- Our institutional academic integrity policy

We have placed our course plan, along with a schedule of assignments and lectures for the semester under the course information. **[Slide of assignment schedule.]** Our assignments are located in a content area labeled “Assignments.” Here students can find the writing prompts, reading assignments, sample papers, practice exams, and actual exams.

During the first week of class, we expect the students to install the software and to spend time getting comfortable with the course materials, particularly the website. This allows time for technical problems to be overcome without the burden of falling behind in the material. Invariably, there will be students that have technical problems or who don’t receive the initial e-mail (due to spam blockers and changed e-mail addresses). We therefore keep our course heavier on the back-end of the semester as a strategy for student success.

Peer Interaction and Student/Teacher Interaction

The absence of the classroom also poses a challenge for student peer interaction and student/teacher interaction. This challenge is overcome in three ways: Blackboard’s “Announcements” page, E-mail, and Blackboard’s “Discussion Board.”

Each week, I post an announcement on the announcement page of Blackboard instructing students on what needs to be accomplished during the week. While redundant, I find this crucial to keeping confusion down. I also use the Announcements page to provide additional information that may be useful. For example, at the time of the first exam, I inform students of how the testing will work. I also provide tips throughout the semester that highlight features of Blackboard that the student may not have found or documents that I have posted that may be useful (such as test-taking tips). This is one means of distributing additional information to students.

E-mail provides many possibilities and some challenges to student/teacher interaction. Most of us are familiar with e-mail and its possibilities and pitfalls, so I won’t belabor this point, except

to point out my major use of e-mail and a significant problem. The biggest use of e-mail with my students is to collect assignments. I will address this below. Students are always free to e-mail me, and I encourage that they do this if they have concerns, questions, etc. On the other hand, five students all asking the same question or raising the same concern becomes taxing. When ten or twenty do this, it becomes a time consuming monster, particularly since this problem can be addressed in about five seconds in the physical classroom. I have only a modest number of students in my Internet course, so this problem is modest. It grows in aggravation with the number of students in a given course. Any course that could conceivably have 80-100 students in the course would see this problem as unbearable. To overcome this problem, I use Blackboard's Discussion Board feature.

The Discussion Board [Slide] allows for peer interaction and student/teacher interaction. As a means of overcoming repeated questions, I include a "Questions" forum, in which I expect students to pose all questions of general interest, such as "How should I format this paper?" or "Can you clarify point x from the lecture?" This frees my inbox from anything but individual concerns, such as "My mom died, can I have an extension on this paper?" or "I am failing, what can I do?" I also provide a forum where technical questions can be asked.

In Bible Lands and Lifeways, we require students to participate in four "Threaded Discussions." For each of these, I pose a question, starting a new forum for each question. Each question, as you can see, has a range of dates, during which the discussion is to take place. Students are expected to post at least once to the forum each week. This encourages discussion among students as they respond to the question. I have found that questions that require students to take a position (and require them to critique other students' answers) are the most effective for this environment. I read responses and interject at various points. In large discussions with many students, this model needs adaptation, otherwise it may be difficult to provide teacher interaction.

Testing

Testing provides an interesting challenge for all distance education courses. However, the online component can serve to mitigate this difficulty. Our solution to the problem of testing is to utilize Blackboard's testing capabilities. Our material is well suited to short answer, multiple choice, etc. Blackboard allows for essay questions, but we do not employ these.

The challenges here are how to monitor these tests. How do you prevent cheating? In order to eliminate this problem, we have eliminated our concern for the issue. We have opted to make the tests open book, allowing the students to make use of their atlases, their notes from the lectures, anything else they want, but not other students or people. This brings the challenge of preventing students from looking up every answer, rendering our exam pointless. We have done this by installing a time limit on the exam. This forces students to know the material and their resources well enough to answer the questions without needing to look up every answer.

Assignment Collection and Grading

Another challenge for online courses is collecting papers and returning graded papers. Many of you have probably already had experience with the use of electronic submissions that we use. We have students submit papers via e-mail in Microsoft Word format. I grade these in word using the "Track Changes" tool. This allows students to see my comments in the middle of the

writing, just as if I were using a pen on paper. I then e-mail the graded papers back. This method of assignment collection can be employed in a traditional format to reduce paper loads and is therefore already common.

Course Evaluation and Improvement

Evaluation of an online course can be an imprecise process, but as with the evaluation of any course, it must be undertaken in order to ensure the highest standards in educational excellence. In this section, our procedure for evaluating Bible Lands and Lifeways will be explored.

The evaluation process we have used can be divided into three categories: evaluation of course material and its presentation, evaluation of educational outcomes, and evaluation of the mechanism of delivery. As we explore these, we will note what we discovered in each of these areas and how we have addressed them and how we plan to address them.

Evaluation of Course Material and its Presentation

Much of the work in this area had already been completed by Dr. Ziese prior to the launching of the internet course as he refined his lectures over the period of years the course was offered in the traditional format. This is a procedure with which most educators are familiar. Therefore, the questions asked in this stage were: How are students responding to the CD? What gaps exist in the material presented, particularly in comparison with the traditional version of the course?

Addressing the first question, we noticed some confusion created among students with regard to the CD over a couple of matters which in turn has given us necessary information for future software revisions. First, and least significant are technical concerns. We have tried to make the CD as user friendly as possible and as technophobe friendly as possible. To a large degree this has been successful, as clear instructions both on the CD and on Blackboard make installing the software perennially easy even for technophobes. However, we acknowledge that there will always be some that cannot get through this phase without considerable help. While this seems unavoidable, we are exploring ways to overcome this in future releases of the software.

Second, and most significantly, confusion has arisen due to the inclusion of assignments on the CD. Various writing assignments, quiz preparatory tools, and quiz instructions were included on the first (and current) version of the CD. Almost immediately, we abandoned these as part of the course, but we were left with a CD that included these materials. This has led us to conclude that the best software development for an online course is one that will allow for the most portability. The more generic the better. All assignments should be left off of the CD in order to maximize the ability to change the course delivery and to maximize the potential contexts for delivery of the course material.

Additionally, we noticed that while the course is titled “Bible Lands and Lifeways,” the lectures in our online version of the course are a bit light on the “Lifeways” aspect. We have supplemented this with readings for the student and have made plans to develop further multimedia lectures on topics pertinent to the course material. The reason for the original omission was development pressure compounded with the newness of the venture for our institution.

Evaluation of Educational Outcomes

As with any course, the results from assignments must be measured against the course goals to determine the level of success of the learning. The key question is, of course, “Are the students learning what they need to learn?” Problems were found in each of the following areas.

Online Discussion

One of the first things that we discovered in offering the course was the poor quality of student interaction in the discussion boards. While it seemed that the questions asked were sufficient to provide opportunity for successful learning on the part of students, the results we received did not back this up. Particularly, students simply weren’t responding frequently enough. In order to fix this problem, I added a weekly posting requirement as well as placing dates on each discussion. Additionally, since it seemed that students were failing to post responses that synthesized data, I decided that it was necessary to narrow the range of their possible responses. Furthermore, I have discovered that asking questions that require students to take or defend a position are more effective than questions that simply ask students to respond to share their thoughts. I have attempted to use the groups feature in order to facilitate discussion through smaller groups, but most of the students failed to find their group. This is a problem I am working on overcoming for future semesters.

Reading and Writing

Since students were not drawing the necessary information out of the material they were reading, we decided that it was necessary to change our approach to reading assignments. Rather than asking students to write a standard review of the material, citing author’s intentions, relative success at meeting these intentions, etc., we found it better to ask a series of questions that would guide the students through the reading. In addition to this, I have posted information on what characterizes acceptable writing, and I am focusing more specifically on commenting on student writing as part of my grading procedure.

Overall Grades and Student Attrition rates

As we evaluate the educational outcomes, it would be prudent to compare grades between the online course and the traditional format. The following table is a comparison of the grades from three semesters of Bible Lands and Lifeways. The statistics are adjusted for those students who actually completed the courses. For the online class, n=83 and for the Traditional Class, n=272.

Grades for Students Completing Bible Lands and Lifeways
Fall 2003 – Fall 2004

	Online	Traditional
A	27.71%	9.93%
B	30.12%	28.31%
C	27.71%	36.40%
D	9.64%	17.28%
F	4.82%	8.09%

By contrast, the number of students who fail to complete the online course seems to be much higher, but we do not have numbers to verify this at this point. Of those who do not complete the

course, almost all have dropped the course as a result of not getting started properly. This suggests problems with our course initialization, which is discussed below.

Since the students in the online version of the class have a higher success rate, we are asking how this can inform the traditional version of the class. The answer at this point, is we're not sure. But we have some ideas. Given that we have now produced a multimedia representation of all of the class lectures, the need to lecture in the classroom is somewhat redundant, provided that we can ensure that students will view the lectures. Given the number of students that are doing this prior to class now, we see this as a real possibility. This opens us up to additional map activities in the classroom that will allow for further synthesis of the material. The traditional format of the classroom does not require high levels of synthesis of material, a weakness highlighted by the online class.

Evaluation of the Mechanism of Delivery

In turning to how students receive the information they need to flow through the course, we asked, "What parts of the course delivery cause confusion or problems for the students?" In asking this question, we have found that the most significant problem is in the area of course initialization. Course initialization includes anything that the students need in order to begin the course and become comfortable with the learning environment. We have determined that several things are necessary for successful course initialization. First, students need a clear statement of how the class will proceed. Students are familiar with classroom experiences, but tend to think of our internet course as a directed study that they do at their own pace. It is therefore necessary to dispel this immediately. Additionally, we have found that at the beginning stages of the course, students are overwhelmed by the newness of the environment and have difficulty with assignments. We anticipate this problem diminishing as familiarity with Blackboard and Internet courses, not to mention technology in general, increase. I have also realized that specific, step by step instructions that are vital. In the past, I have instructed students to "Explore the website and course materials." This has been obviously been unsuccessful because I continually have students asking where to find assignments. Next semester I will include specific instructions on how to "Explore." I have also learned that students need to be told things multiple things in multiple places.

Informing the Traditional Classroom

The online version and the traditional versions of this course have feed off of each other. The online version has allowed for the refinement of certain classroom expectations and highlighted weaknesses in the classroom delivery of the material. Additionally, the development of the online version of the course promises to provide opportunities for transforming the classroom version of the course into a blended educational experience that is second to none.

The key area in which the online version of this class has informed the classroom experience is on the level of synthesis of information. Developing assignments for the online class led to the realization that the traditional classroom version of the course lacked forced synthesis of information. One purpose of the course is to provide students with the geographical information necessary to inform readings of the Biblical text. The delivery of this information has been successful, but in light of the online course, we have noticed that the classroom students are not required to apply this information to the text. In order to address this, we are considering the

possibility of expecting students to view the lectures prepared for the online course as part of the requirements of the course in order to allow time to incorporate other materials into the classroom, such as map activities akin to the assignments we require of the online students.

Contact Information

For further information about the course, to make comments or suggestions, or for inquiries about other online offerings from EagleOnline, you can contact us at:

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Resources

Main Tools Used for Creating Bible Lands and Lifeways

Adobe Acrobat - Converting Word Perfect and Word files to PDF

<http://www.adobe.com/education/main.html> - Free demos and Educational Pricing

Adobe Premiere – Capture, Edit, Compose and Render Video

<http://www.adobe.com/motion/main.html> - Free demos and Current Products

Also provides tips and ideas for video creation

CK Rename – Quick renames of all or some files in a folder when changing naming conventions

<http://www.musicsucks.com/CKSoft/CKRename/index.htm> - Freeware, donations welcome

It does allow you to undo changes (in case you make a mistake)

NOTE: You can't do this with the Lectora files (or nothing will work anymore)

Real Producer Pro (Now Helix Producer) – Render AVI into Real Video Formats

<https://helixcommunity.org/> - Software and a wealth of instructional material for starting

Macromedia Dreamweaver – For editing pages that required customization after Lectora

Macromedia Fireworks – For editing and creating graphics for the program

Macromedia Flash – For creating the interactive maps and the intro to the course CD

<http://www.macromedia.com>

Trivantis Lectora – For building the course interface and interactions with the materials

<http://www.lectora.com/> -

Other Software I've Found Useful in Project Development

JR Free Tools *JDirPrinter* – allowed a print of all files in all folders and subfolders. Invaluable

as the project grew and I needed to edit a link to a particular file, or double check that all

needed files had been included. <http://www.spadixbd.com/freetools/JDirPrint.htm>.

Six Mile Creek Systems' *Springboard* – free or shareware (\$30) storyboarding

<http://6sys.com/Springboard/index.html> - regularly updated and improved simple

storyboarding program for laying out your ideas before program or video production begins

W3C Synchronized Multimedia Homepage – Explanations, Editors, Standards for SMIL

(Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language)

<http://www.w3.org/AudioVideo/>

Facilitating Online Interaction

Collison, G., Elbaum, B., Tinker, R., & Haavind, S. (2000). Facilitating online learning.

Effective strategies for moderators. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (1999). Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace : Effective

Strategies for the Online Classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.