

## NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES AS EARLY EXAMPLE OF FORMATIVE DISTANCE LEARNING DUE TO POSITIVE EMOTIONS

### NOVOZAVJETNE POSLANICE KAO RANI PRIMJER OBLIKOVANJA OSOBE UČENJEM NA DALJINU KROZ POZITIVNE OSJEĆAJE

Monika Bajić<sup>1</sup>, Milan Bajić<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Bible institute, Center for biblical research (CBI), Zagreb, Croatia*

<sup>2</sup>*Zagreb University of Applied Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia*

#### Abstract

This paper will introduce and compare distance learning in the case of Paul's epistles (disciples of Christ) and Universities (students). Distance learning is not a new idea, it has been known since the first century. Christian teachers, e.g. Paul of Tarsus, taught their disciples through epistles, not only to exchange teaching and information, moreover, it was regarded as formative process of the whole person. Due to fostering positive emotions their teaching letters take on a formative level in the sense that disciples adopted the information (teaching) as active part of their lives and thus were (trans)formed by it. Psychology confirms, information related to emotions is stored permanently in the brain, and the learned material is better evoked. That way the information becomes available on demand and takes on formative characteristics (like with the disciples of Christ). Meaning, the student will be informed through distance learning and thereby the whole person can be formed. The formative aspect is vital, it ensures for the student not only information, furthermore, formation will enable the student to incorporate the learned material into their practical lives as well.

**Keywords:** *New Testament, Epistles, distance learning, emotions, (trans)formation.*

#### Sažetak

Ovaj rad će predstaviti i usporedite učenje na daljinu u slučaju Pavlovih poslanica (Kristovi učenici) i sveučilišta (studenti). Učenje na daljinu nije nova ideja, poznato je od prvog stoljeća. Kršćanski učitelji, npr. Pavao iz Taršiša, poučavao je svoje učenike kroz poslanice, nije to bila samo

razmjena informacija, štoviše, to je bio proces oblikovanje cijele osobe. Obzirom da su poticane pozitivne emocije kroz poslanice, njihova poučna pisma poprimaju oblikovnu razinu u smislu da učenici usvajaju informacije (učenje) kao aktivni dio svog života, tako nastaje (pre)oblikovanje. Psihologija potvrđuje da se informacije povezane s emocijama trajno pohranjuju u mozgu, a naučena se materija lakše doziva u sjećanje. Tako informacija postaje dostupna na zahtjev i poprima formativne karakteristike (kao i s Kristovim učenicima). Dakle, student će biti informiran putem učenja na daljinu, i moguće je da cijela osoba bude (pre)oblikovana. Formativni aspekt je bitan, jer osigurava da student ne prima samo informacije, već biva preoblikovan. To omogućuje studentu da naučeno gradivo primjeni u svom praktičnom životu.

**ključne riječi:** *Novi Zavjet, poslanice, učenje na daljinu, emocije, oblikovanje.*

#### 1. New Testament Epistles, an ancient medium for distance learning

##### 1. *Novozavjetne poslanice kao drevni medij za učenje na daljinu*

Epistles were the primary written correspondence form in the ancient Greco-Roman world, especially throughout the New Testament times. The word epistle comes from the Greek *epistole* which means "letter" or "message," but in the beginning it "referred to an *oral* communication sent by a messenger." This kind of communication was used in diverges areas of life, formal (e.g. commercial, legal, military and governmental documents) and informal (e.g. personal letters). [1]

Paul of Tarsus, Apostle of Jesus Christ, employed this form of communication to spread and reinforce his teachings of Jesus Christ and Christian conduct in the church, secular society, and family settings with crucial information on religious practice and theology. Even though some of Paul's epistles were personal letters, they were more than private. Mostly his epistles were addressed to Christian communities, intended to be read publicly within the churches. He wrote from the position of a sent representative of Jesus Christ who is the head of the church on earth. This gave him the authority to act as teacher and mentor; furthermore, to instruct, give guidance, inspire and to rebuke. These epistles were

occasional, contextual writings addressing particular situations, and were the substitutes for Paul's personal presence. He was concerned with the life situations of his readers, but never in the impersonal way characteristic of many Hellenistic letters. Paul treated each situation as unique and important. At the same time his letters set forth significant theological teaching and express a Christian understanding of life which reaches beyond the particular historical situation. [1]

Noteworthy, Paul wrote to congregations he personally knew (e.g. 1 and 2 Epistle to the Thessalonians, Epistle to the Galatians or 1 and 2 Epistle to the Corinthians) and to churches he did not know personally (e.g. Epistle to the Romans). Also, he mentored a few leaders and wrote to them with the same purpose as the other letters (e.g. 1 and 2 Epistle to the Timothy or Titus). An epistle would be carried by a trusted messenger, who was recommended by the author, first, to the addressed congregation, and afterwards it became a circular letter for the other churches. The messenger publicly read the epistle to the believers. Church members received the teaching-epistles in the same manner as if the Apostle himself were with them. As above stated, Paul was interested in the lives of the disciples. He treated them with care and devoted equal time to write about solving their problems as well as his teachings. Through maintaining personal relationships with the disciples, Paul mirrored Jesus Christ and his teachings, and thus was a role-model for the disciples to follow. Those epistles pictured to the disciples a new world

(i.e. a new mind set) of which they could be part of. Only those who took the teachings beyond the cognitive level and actually related it in their everyday life actions, were (trans)formed into a new person.

## 2. Formation Through the Learning Process

### 2. *Oblikovanje osebe kroz učenje*

The epistles would not only inform and correct or resolve conflicts, likewise they had (and still have today) a formative value. The disciples of Christ viewed an epistle not only as source of information or instructions. Moreover, believers considered the teachings in the context of their lives (i.e. the church) and adopted the given information (i.e. learned) so that this knowledge formed and changed their entire lives; their approach to life altogether. This kind of formation through distance teaching was only possible because believers were driven by their positive emotions, first, for their Lord Jesus Christ, and second, for their communities (sacred and secular). Gratitude, happiness, and hope are emotions (i.e. emotional experiences) which create the potential will to perform better with the goal of higher achievement. [3] Positive emotions and the divine intervention were the force that determined the New Testament believers to take on Paul's teachings even if he was not physically present. What Paul did through his teachings was to demonstrate and explain how certain teachings were of practical use in everyday life. Another aspect was his clear presentation of how those teachings, if rightly implemented in thought and action, could bring benefits to the individual believer and to the faith and secular community. Psychology confirms that a student (esp. graduate student) shows more interest (and is less bored) with the lessons if the instructor can clearly relate the learning material to practical or relevant use in the student's life or work place. [4]

[R]esearch operating within a self-determination paradigm posits that not all academic activities are intrinsically motivating, but through providing external supports, such as a rationale as to why an activity is useful or relevant to students' lives, students may internalize the

value of engaging in activities that may not be particularly compelling or intrinsically interesting. ... Fostering relevance is one such external support, which refers to actions that help students understand the connection of the academic material to their own interests and goals. When students perceive instruction to be successful at fostering relevance, they are more likely to experience positive affect in learning situations and greater engagement. In graduate-level education courses, instructional strategies to foster relevance may include connecting course material to real-world or practice applications. [5]

Significant is that Paul was the external support in this whole (trans)formation process and was on disposal to the disciples. In fact, his maturity and help (i.e. professor's expertise) was critical for the disciples to accomplish acting out the teachings.

### 3. Emotions—Part of the Learning Process

#### 3. *Osjećaji – Dio procesa učenja*

Similar to Paul, a professor has the role of a mentor and is the authority-figure in class. The instructor's way of interaction with students is crucial for their processing and how learned information will be stored in the brain. Today distance learning can have three forms. In many on-line programs students do not know their instructors personally and probably will never meet any of them. Another possibility is that the student has a one week in-class experience with the instructor, combined with on-line work for the rest of the semester. And the third option where one has a distance mentor-relationship with the instructor, for instance, when writing a thesis. In addition to teaching new material, professors should teach (or help) their students to manage their emotions "during challenging learning and evaluation activities." That way instructors have the chance to decidedly impact their students' accomplishment emotions. [5] If the instructor limits his interaction with the students only to communicate when something is wrong or assignments were poorly done, then the instructor will only evoke negative emotions. This kind of critique has its place only if the professor is also commenting on the

student's accomplishments, hence the critique becomes constructive and not destructive. Poor personal relationships between instructor and student will inevitably lead to a decline or even a complete loss of learning performance for the course. The results are poor learning outcomes. Where no positive emotions are involved there is no lasting formation of the student possible. Emotions come in when professor and students interact on a more intensive and personal basis. The professor is the fueling force in that kind of relationship and his engagement (or the lack for it), and constant communication with the students (communally or individually, via blackboard or e-mail), ensures that not only information is traded. In addition, the knowledge boosted by the professor's praise (or encouragement) will be emotionally experienced by the student. Experts confirm that "emotionally charged memories, both positive and negative, are remembered better. One reason for this phenomenon is that emotional stimuli involves the arousal of the amygdala, consequently affecting the cortex (the brain region responsible for focusing one's attention) and the hippocampus (the brain region responsible for consolidating memory)." Further, "Emotion may trigger the recall of memories stored in neocortical representations. Amygdala backprojections to the cortex could perform this for emotion in a way analogous to that in which the hippocampus could implement the retrieval in the neocortex of recent (episodic) memories." [7]

The student does not only receive information, but information, which is emotionally processed, transforms and the taught material becomes part of the student life (i.e. enables them to use in practice). [8] "Another function of emotion is that by enduring for minutes or longer after a reinforcing stimulus has occurred, it may help to produce persistent and continuing motivation and direction of behavior, to help achieve a goal or goals." [9]

### 4. Personal Testimony (Monika Bajic)

#### 4. *Osobno svjedočanstvo (Monika Bajić)*

This hypothesis is a result of my own experience with distance learning. Over a year ago, I enrolled in an on-line Master's program (Masters of Theological studies) at a private university in

the United States of America. My motivation was personal development and higher academic requirements for my work place. At the beginning, I was skeptical towards distance learning methods and if such a way of learning can accomplish anything except of information transfer. After the first semester, I was assured, and had to admit that this method of education has nothing missing. In fact, there are many benefits for people like me (i.e. employed, family, volunteering, etc.). The learning outcomes do not lack compared to in-class (face-to-face) studies.

In my opinion the professor and how he handles his students determines the learning experience and thus learning outcomes. I had a few professors whose approach is obsolete. Their communication with students is very limited and if not initiate by the student themselves, the professor would not interact other than giving mass-instructions via e-mail or discussion board. Beyond their weekly instruction for the discussion board and assignments, their communication was mostly restricted to comments and correcting wrong behavior or poorly done assignments. A few instructors used a more personal approach in their on-line courses. I experienced and received through such a course knowledge that (trans)formed me. My brain stored the received information in a way that I can access it any time I want. Not only do I remember the lessons, I integrated them in my everyday life practice. One part of our assignment was to write a weekly journal on particular chapters of an Old Testament book. This exercises helped me to integrate some personal and cultural experience in specific areas of religious practice. The instructor read my journal every week and communicated through comments on my journal with me. This very communication was a great motivation and source of positive emotions for me, which helped to set my learning dynamics more effective and higher achieving goals for that class. The instructor also once encouraged me in an on-line discussion to freely state my opinion and to include my own experiences and emotions connected to a particular event. The professor's weekly comments and several encouragements on my work/learn performance increased multiple times my learning interest and again provided positive

emotions which would drive me to focus more on better learning outcomes. The other source of positive emotions was the transformation of myself that took place while studying portions of the Holy Scriptures and class material.

## 5. Discussion

### 5. *Rasprava*

Are emotions really part of the learning process, if they are, what is their place in teaching in general, and more specific is it possible to make emotions an integral part of distance learning? In ancient times, holy scriptures of different religions were not only sacred mystical ritual cookbooks, but rather teaching material for the whole person's wellbeing. Apostle Paul's epistles from the New Testament are used as fine example how teacher – learner relationship might look like in distance learning. Three models were considered: people who never met their teacher in person, students who once met their teacher and those who were his disciples – they were personally mentored by him. All those relationships were soaked with deep emotions, starting at the teacher as role-model all the way to the teacher being a “new father” who helps his loved disciples develop their full potential in life. The role of emotion can vary in these relationships; a mentor can call upon other triggers than a teacher. In distance learning teachers should be aware of the relationship level they were able to develop. They should fish between students, during introductory classes, to seek those who are eager to develop deeper relationships and not neglect those who for any reason are satisfied with “just” learning. As I (Milan) was watching Monika in her distance learning classes, it was always the teacher who was initiating a deeper relationship through personalized answers and trying to understand and value her position on given topics. The dark side of distance learning was that some teachers had given robotic, general, non-personalized answers which demoralized Monika to go deeper in learning, instead she just memorized the facts. To be fair, when Monika was passionate about some topics, she learned, she gave herself so much in discussion, writing of papers and other tasks that her teachers were also delighted even though she

had not met them personally. It is possible that part of the emotionally overwhelmed learning is due to religious content – but are we sure that all other subjects that are taught are emotionless or could not develop deeper level relationships between student and teacher?

## 6. Conclusion

### 6. Zaključak

Technology by itself is emotionless, the only way to express emotions is to engage students in content creation and expression of their opinions,

attitudes and emotions in written or multimedia form. Professors should have all the tools and skills in hands to engage students in online classrooms, the only problem that might occur is they are not familiar with how to use them. Changing the reality of teaching environment where teachers are not anymore the solitary source of information, asks for development of and finding some new roles that professors could play in learning. Once emotions are envisioned as inseparable part of learning one must question the limits of these relationships and how to protect all stakeholders from emotional or any other manipulation or misuse.

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**AUTHORS · AUTORI****Monika Bajić**

Monika Bajić graduated in Theology at the Bible Institute in Zagreb and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek. She continues her Master's program, focused on the

Old Testament, at Lipscomb University in the USA. She has been ten years active in pastoral and missionary ministry and is still engaged in Christian counseling. Monika works at the Center for Biblical Research (CBI), a department of the Bible Institute in Zagreb. She lives with her husband, Milan, in Zagreb and they have a daughter, Zita.

**Milan Bajić**

Milan Bajić is the Head of the Multimedia Lab at the University of Applied Sciences in Zagreb. Milan has more than a decade of experience in recording and editing video for various

television channels, corporate, government and non government organisations. After a successful career in video production, he decided to enter the academia. Milan's main professional interests are linked to visual content in various educational contexts. His current research is focused to documentary film and photography, and their applications to educational settings.

**Corresponding author:**

mbajic@tvz.hr

**Monika Bajić**

Monika Bajić je diplomirala teologiju na Biblijskom institutu u Zagrebu i Visokom evanđeoskom teološkom učilištu u Osijeku. Magistarski studiji, fokusiran na Stari zavjet, nastavlja na Lipscomb University u SAD. Bila je deset godina aktivna u pastoralnoj i misijskoj službi. Nadalje se bavi kršćanskim savjetovanjem. Zaposlena je u Centru biblijskih istraživanja (CBI) u Zagrebu, odjel Biblijskog instituta. Sa suprugom Milanom živi u Zagrebu i imaju kćerku Zitu.

**Milan Bajić**

Milan Bajić je voditelj Centra za multimediju na Tehničkom veleučilištu u Zagrebu. Milan ima višegodišnje iskustvo snimanja i montaže za različite tv postaje, korporativne, državne i nevladine organizacije. Nakon uspješne karijere u video produkciji, započeo je s radom u visokoškolskom obrazovanju. Milanov stručni interes je u području vizualnog sadržaja u različitim obrazovnim kontekstima. Trenutno istraživanje je u području dokumentarnog filma i fotografije te njihove primjene u obrazovnom okruženju.

**Korespodencija:**

mbajic@tvz.hr