But Your Students Aren't On Campus Anymore: The Necessity of E-Books for 21st Century Theological Education

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Over the past decade, my experience as a tertiary lecturer in theology, church history, and preaching has revealed that lecturers easily misunderstand the relationship between library and classroom. We often overlook the significant role libraries, and those who curate them, play in supporting student research and success. Lecturers, like myself, may set assignments and essays, but students struggle to produce quality academic work without adequate library access and resources. And although this truth seems intuitive and obvious, this relationship is often overlooked and magnified by the unique challenges facing 21st century theological education.

I hope this journal contribution, such that it is, sparks deeper dialogue between librarian and lecturer in order to serve our students in today's ever evolving landscape. As such, this is less of a proper research essay and more an impassioned plea in which I invite my readers to consider how my story is becoming more and more normative. As I share this experience with e-books and tertiary education, please envision this as perhaps a chapter titled, "On E-books" in a wider fictitious edited volume, *Tales from the Front Lines of 21st Century Tertiary Theological Education*. And, from that vantage point, accept my invitation to reflect upon its implications for your particular educational ecosystem.

Because the truth is this: the majority of our theological students simply are not on campus anymore. Lecturers and librarians need to recognize this, understand the implications for supporting student engagement and thriving, and adapt as necessary.

Who am I to make this point, lecturer, and non-librarian that I am? I am currently a Kaiako/Lecturer at St John's Theological College, Auckland and oversee the deployment of their Regional Programme for the province of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia. St John's College's Regional Programme delivers an NZQA Level 5 Diploma in Christian Studies as an extension of St John's College.

Between 2016 and 2023, I oversaw the Regional Anglican Studies Programme for the Anglican Diocese of Wellington, New Zealand, in partnership with St John's College. From approximately 2017–2023, alongside my diocesan responsibilities, I worked with the college's director of academic programme to develop Regional Anglican Studies programmes throughout the province. Lecturers would travel from Auckland to diocese across the country (though principally Wellington, Waiapu, and Christchurch diocese) and deliver course content in weekend block format. Beginning in 2018, St John's College began offering their Flexi-Learn programme, an online-only mode of delivering the Level 5 Diploma; this was open to students from any diocese within the Anglican province of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia. They would join weekly Zoom-based lectures and do all coursework remotely. By definition, none of these students lived on campus. None had convenient library access.

Regional and Flexi-Learn students quickly surpassed the number of on-campus students at St John's College, almost doubling their numbers, and the John Kinder Library serves them all. Based in Auckland, the Kinder library is, "The library for the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia, Te Haahi Mihinare ki Niu Tireni, ki Nga Moutere o Te Moana Nui a Kiwa."[1] The library has an excellent distance loan system for students outside of Auckland. Their efficient and well organized staff quickly post requested books to students, and returns are simple and easily achieved. Their system is quick, efficient, and as painless as possible.

And yet, as lecturer and programme director, I quickly noticed that the majority of students were not utilizing this opportunity. I began asking why and listening to their responses. Almost all students are over 30, have families, and work full time. They simply do not have the capacity in life to anticipate the textbooks they *may* need in order to research an essay due in a month and request them far enough in advance. Most students budget 10-20 hours to work on an assignment, almost always over the weekend before an assignment is due.

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[1] See https://www.kinderlibrary.ac.nz/, accessed 15 January 2024.

This is far too late to request books to be posted. Consequently, my students rarely availed themselves of the Kinder Library's substantial holdings and their research and engagement languished.

Then, in 2018, I encountered e-books.

I taught a class in which the main text was available as an e-book, and our library had e-book resources related to the assessment. Regional students could easily do their readings. They could research their topics in depth when it suited their life schedule. I saw the impact e-books had on student engagement and the quality of their work. Simply put: the more e-book resources they could access, the more they engaged the content, and the more they thrived as learners. We had better discussions. I marked better essays. The overall experience – both student and lecturer – substantially improved. Furthermore, as these were library e-resources, I could assign vast sections of text and no longer worry about copyright issues associated with scanning and sharing content.

I overhauled my course bibliographies to accommodate my remote students. I decided I would only use textbooks that were available in e-book format and – to the best of my ability – I ensured the library had sufficient e-books to support assignment research. This simple commitment on my part, and the reciprocal effort from the Kinder Library staff, revolutionized student engagement, learning, and research.

Looking back, these steps were – from an institutional standpoint – outside the norm in 2018 and 2019. Yes, most all theological institutions had distance programmes and therefore distance students, but most logistical support still presupposed the on-campus student as the core stakeholder. Distance students were peripheral to core student experiences. My Regional Anglican Studies Programme's operational issues were fairly unique (i.e., from a central location in Auckland, support the research and learning needs of students from Invercargill to Tonga).

And then the world got sick and shut down in 2020 and 2021….but also had to keep going; I was no longer unique. Now, everyone was online. Now, all students were distance students because *nobody* was on campus anymore. They couldn't be.

Covid served as an institutional catalyst – an accelerant for institutional development and growth. Tertiary institutions already knew distance programmes were feasible but kept them at the margins of core business. And yet, across institutions, distance students are a rapidly increasing percentage of student enrollment. Covid lockdowns moved them front-and center and they have not ceded that space. Digital delivery requires less operational overhead, easily increases classroom size (and thereby fees), and allows wider reach (and student recruitment). Weekly on-campus lectures are increasingly being replaced by block format lectures, blended in-person and online participant classrooms, and asynchronous delivery; this is *the* way forward for tertiary

institutions, especially smaller theological institutions that need to consolidate overhead expenses whilst increasing student enrollment.
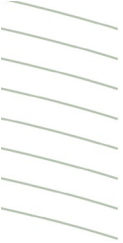
This reality becomes clearer when lecturers and librarians take a step back and consider how our institutions are responding to post-covid realities. Institutions are upskilling their lecturers in virtual classrooms, online teaching, and the flipped classroom. They are working to identify the optimal blend of face-to-face and digital delivery. But the key insight is that our institutions are problem solving around better ways to maximize face-to-face contact, deliver online content, and support distance learning; they are not figuring out how to drop remote learning. We see creative modes of face-to-face delivery, but remote reading, remote research, and remote essay writing.

I believe this reality has created a different problem for us to solve together, as lecturers and librarians: how do we resource high level text-based study and research for our block format, blended, asynchronous, and virtual classrooms.....knowing they are soon to become (if not already) our institutions' core constituency?

Unfortunately, I do not believe enough of us are thinking along these lines yet. Or, at least most lecturers are not. Most lecturers continue designing course outlines and reading lists that presuppose the on-campus student experience. This implies ready access to library assets and thereby neglects most of our students' realities. Library access has always been a key aspect of student success and we have yet to fully appreciate how much catch-up work we have to do.

To illustrate my point, I would like to share my experience from September 2023 as an adjunct lecturer at another institution. My lecture content was delivered over one week – 30 hours of lectures from Monday to Friday – with one Zoom meeting approximately a month before the block and one Zoom meeting approximately a month after. This class has five students, all considered 'on campus', with none living closer than a 45 minute drive away. Every one of my students had a full time job, and half had children at home (across a wide age range).

The institution had hard copies of my class's core texts but no e-book access, and only two of my five students had reason to be on campus leading up to the block intensive. The other three did not have enough margin in life go to campus for pre-block reading. This meant pre-block readings that were not digital were unread (and, due to copyright issues, I could not share pdf copies). Consequently, I had to adjust my readings to internet resources/writings in the common domain and change my lecture structure in order to accommodate their limited access. Well, apart from one student. This student has access to another institution's library and had digital e-book access to every resource I originally assigned. Every student was a highly motivated learner, but the one with access to e-books came prepared and was substantially more engaged in our time together.

This issue of e-book access extends beyond pre-readings for block courses, as it also affects the quality of essays written after the block. The disparity between my students without e-book access and my one with access was obvious. And, again, all five students were considered 'on campus' students. All were highly motivated. They all could still – in theory – drive to campus to access the library, even though practically speaking over half could not. This begs the further question: What if they were distance students and part of a blended classroom? I would have had to entirely change the course in order to accommodate their lack of library access.

That semester's teaching made the disadvantage distance students experience, simply because their library did not resource e-books, very obvious. If this were a blended classroom, how could I avoid penalizing the lower quality of research the distance students would produce simply because the library did not suitably invest in e-books? If the majority of students enrolled in our tertiary theological institutions are distance students, how are we transitioning to meet their needs?

This can no longer be the case, and I have found myself constantly reminding lecturers at my institution that the majority of our students do not have ready access to our remarkable library's extensive holdings. I have been extremely fortunate to have the Kinder Library's support as I have made this conceptual change and adjusted because I have understood that my students aren't on campus anymore.

And this – if I may – is the heart of my report from the front lines of tertiary theological education. I believe covid accelerated the tipping point from on campus, in person, students being the majority student experience to distance students being the majority student experience (either block, blended, or asynchronous); I also believe that we need to shift together – as lecturers and librarians – to place our students in the best positions to thrive as emerging scholars….because they're not on campus anymore.

I invite you to consider this conceptual change as well.

In light of that, I would like to offer a few recommendations. The first is a bit basic and repeats the point just made but is also the most foundational and bears repeating: the bulk of our students are not on campus and the growth edge for tertiary theological education is remote students, blended delivery, and decentralized research. Please know this and consider its implications for how your institution resources students and researchers for success. Allow yourselves to become obsessed asking, "How do we optimally resource students who live 400 km from campus?" Because you now have them. In fact, they are your core students. They are our future.

The second recommendation is very close to the first. Many – if not most – educators are not thinking through these implications. Help them become preoccupied with that same question. Help them understand their students aren't on campus anymore and encourage a hard line against using resources that are not available as e-books. Allow yourself to earn a reputation for asking them, "And how will distance students read that? How will we stay within copyright use? How will distance students write research essays from this bibliography?"

My final recommendation would be to grasp that this moves forward through relationship together, and a little whakawhanaungatanga goes a long way. In some respects, this conceptual shift is unknown territory and produces an additional strain on systems already under duress. Libraries can feel as if they effectively have to double their holdings to include e-book versions of texts already on campus. None of our institutions are made of money and enrollments continue shrinking; these realities cause institutional tension. As in all areas of life, we healthily navigate the unknown by walking well together. Genuine friendship and clear communication are the glues that bind. Share morning and afternoon tea; start conversations as your lecturers rework and revisit their course outlines. Help them understand that their students are far away. Together we can grasp that we need to attend more carefully to the texts we assign and the texts we acquire.

Together as librarians and lecturers we will navigate the unknown and support our students….who aren't on campus anymore.