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The Online, Asynchronous, Accelerated, Compressed, Modular, Standardized, and Adult Undergraduate Course in Biblical Interpretation: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The long title of this article reflects the multiple dynamics at work in a new type of class commonly found in adult degree completion programs in higher education. These characteristics are briefly surveyed in order to show how they impinge upon one another to both limit and complicate strategies for effective learning. These dynamics and complications are illustrated by exploring how they affect teaching and learning in an undergraduate class on biblical interpretation. The article closes by considering further strategies that may be employed in this highly constrained type of class.

KEYWORDS

online, asynchronous, accelerated, modular, adult, scripture

The deluge of adjectives in this title is intentional, for it captures the dynamics of a new kind of course that has emerged in higher education. The rise of online education, the surge in non-traditional adult enrollment, and the innovations of degree completion programs have coalesced to make this new kind of course common for many students working their way to a university degree. Research, to be cited below, has been done on many of the individual adjectives above: studies about online learning, explorations of how to craft an asynchronous discussion, descriptions of the characteristics of adult learners, and so on. Many studies have explored program level features and needs in the success and attrition of students in adult degree programs ([Kasworm 2001](#); [Todd et al. 2015](#); Decker 2017). However, only a handful of studies have analyzed the dynamics of teaching and learning in specific classes within this larger educational paradigm. The scholarship of teaching and learning (like most other forms of research) prefers clear, isolatable research questions rather than the fuzzy and murky situation of multiple, simultaneous considerations, but these elements all impinge on one another in this new kind of class. Putting these qualifiers together creates a set of compounding constraints that complicates the search for teaching strategies because the recommendations for good teaching from one domain (e.g., multiple repetitions of an activity across time are helpful for learning in an online environment) often are frustrated by

another necessary factor (e.g., these courses must be accelerated and compressed to have fewer assignments across less time). This case study will open by unpacking this new type of course and my experience teaching a class of this type on biblical interpretation in an adult degree completion program. It will then discuss the factors listed in the title and how their combination limits and complicates the selection of teaching-learning strategies. Finally, the article will close with possibilities and suggestions to help facilitate a better learning experience within this type of course.

A New Kind of Class in Context

This case study arose out of my aim to create and teach this new kind of course well, so a brief disclosure of my background and experience will help situate the following discussion. After working in three one-year visiting professor positions on traditional campuses, I was hired by Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) in 2010 to teach in the College of Adult and Professional Studies, which offers a variety of accelerated undergraduate and graduate degree programs for working adults. Such programs bring college degrees into reach for adults who often work full-time. They can take courses part-time and still complete an associate degree in two years or a bachelor's degree in four years (or less). As a full-time faculty member, I teach regularly, oversee course offerings in Bible and the Biblical studies major, and work with several adjunct instructors. I have written and taught several courses in this system, and my reflections in this article draw on my own experience as an instructor and course writer for this new kind of class. This essay will touch on a class that I teach frequently entitled BIL-202: Inductive Bible Study, a six-week online course practicing a method of biblical interpretation required for students pursuing an associate degree in Christian Ministry.

IWU's adult programs fit into a larger trend of higher education which has seen dramatic growth over the past twenty years. While IWU's adult enrollment hovers around eight thousand students, many other schools in this domain have even larger numbers of students in similar systems ("[Best Online Colleges](#)" and "[Top Adult Degree Programs](#)").¹ While some statistics indicate that enrollment in adult degree programs may be plateauing ([Barrett 2018](#)), the adult degree completion program is already an influential piece of the higher education landscape, and it is here to stay. These large programs have developed their own culture and pedagogical norms that are built with this new kind of class. Thus, this new kind of class has reached a degree of institutionalized establishment, and it too is here to stay. While each school has its own distinctive formula for programs and classes, most of the courses offered have a mix of online, asynchronous, accelerated, compressed, modular, standardized, and adult elements as mentioned in the title. Let us turn to a brief survey of these characteristics.

Online

Online classes have become a common modality for higher education. While some students in adult degree programs take onsite, face-to-face classes, the vast majority of students complete their programs entirely online, and enrollment in online courses continues to rise ([Lederman 2018](#)). The same is true at IWU where I teach—onsite enrollment has decreased over the past ten years while online enrollment has continued to grow.² These trends have intensified during the pandemic. Online classes typically make use of one of a handful of learning management systems (LMSs) such as Moodle, Brightspace, Canvas, or Blackboard ([Mansfield 2019](#)). The LMS provides an integrated virtual platform for delivering course content, organizing learning activities, guiding student progress, and assessing student work. LMSs have evolved from mere content delivery platforms to being a comprehensive learning hub for content, communication, activities, and assessment (Sulun 2018). The material in an LMS is often primarily text-based, though social media formats and video have come to play increasing roles. New and innovative tools for online student learning are always emerging (e.g., Flipgrid, Thinglink, Quizlet, Padlet, etc.), and various creative activities can be employed (e.g., research, curating, annotating, wiki-building, gamified tasks, problem-based case studies, etc.), but six categories cover most of the options for assessable

1 A Google search gives the following approximate enrollment numbers: Purdue Global—29,000, Capella University—37,000, Ashford University—41,000, Kaplan University—45,000, Walden University—53,000, Southern New Hampshire University—63,000, Liberty University—101,000, and Western Governors University—110,000.

2 In 2013, IWU had 6920 students enrolled online and 3371 enrolled onsite (a roughly two-to-one ratio). By 2019, those numbers had shifted to 7550 online and 858 onsite (an almost nine-to-one ratio).

online assignments: discussion boards, quizzes/tests, writing tasks, multimedia creations, adaptive simulations, and collaborative projects (which are often done on one of the preceding types).³ Online learning has matured to the point that significant books have been published on the principles and practices for excellent online teaching (Stavredes 2011; Means, Bakia, and Murphy 2014; Miller 2014; Boettcher and Conrad 2016; Nilson and Goodson 2018).

These texts on online instruction have short sections on asynchronous features, which is a common component of online education (e.g., Stavredes 2011, 167–72; Miller 2014, 25–26; Boettcher and Conrad 2016, 9–12, 47–52; Nilson and Goodson 2018, 184; but not mentioned in Means, Bakia, and Murphy 2014). Stavredes (2011, 2–30) focuses on online education for adult learners, but Miller (2014), Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014), Boettcher and Conrad (2016), and Nilson and Goodson (2018) make almost no mention of andragogy or the situation of adult learners. Only Boettcher and Conrad (2016, 305–16) discuss accelerated/intensive courses. While most mention modules as a helpful form of course content organization, they do not consider the pedagogical dynamics in much depth (perhaps only briefly, Boettcher and Conrad 2016, 51). All of these helpful books assume that the online course is created by the person who will teach it as opposed to the type of course being considered in this case study that is standardized and distributed to others to teach. Thus, while helpful insights have been provided by research and theorizing about online education, such work often fails to address other characteristics that are concomitant components of online learning.

Asynchronous

The majority of undergraduate online courses at IWU (and many other schools) are also asynchronous. This means that there are no specifically designated times for student work and participation. Learning activities are designed to be done by individuals at their own selected time and then uploaded to the LMS for students and instructors to interact with at other times. Such courses are desired by and designed for adult students who need to fit learning into busy lives alongside multiple commitments to family, work, and community. Good research has been done regarding online asynchronous classes, mostly focusing on how to improve student engagement, especially in discussion boards (Bender 2003; [Riggs and Linder 2016](#); [Ergulec 2019](#)).

Asynchronicity limits options for personal interaction and many common classroom processing activities (e.g., think-pair-share or minute papers). However, self-pacing and delayed responses are built in components of asynchronous courses, and these have the benefit of providing time for critical thinking and careful writing (Conrad and Donaldson 2011, 25; [Soon and Quek 2019](#)). At IWU, phone calls and virtual chat sessions between instructors and students are allowed (even encouraged), but they cannot be required, and many students cannot participate due to schedule demands. Recall that many robust resources on online teaching infrequently consider the dynamics of an exclusively asynchronous online class (Boettcher and Conrad 2016, 9–10, 51–52; Miller 2014, 25–26.). Thus, exactly how the online nature of a class and the asynchronous nature of a class interact, support, and limit one another is not directly addressed.

Intensive, Compressed, and Accelerated

The next set of qualifiers suffers from a lack of definitional clarity. “Intensive,” “compressed,” and “accelerated” have all been used to describe classes that are shortened in some way. I reserve “intensive” to describe adaptations of traditional, face-to-face classes from a typical fifteen-week semester into a short period of one to four weeks during which the students attend full-time and in person for several days in a row (sometimes with preceding or follow-up assignments). “Compressed,” then, describes a class designed to be offered in a shortened term usually from five to eight weeks and taken concurrently with regular work responsibilities. At IWU, most online undergraduate courses are either five or six weeks long. These can be online with no class contact hours or face-to-face, with the latter having a once-a-week class session of three to

³ For instance, St. Leo University lists the following types of assignments that may be encountered in an online class: Reading, discussion posts, analyzing visuals, writing reports, and doing group projects ([2019](#)). Another list includes responses to reading/videos, research papers, blogs, journals (all primarily writing tasks), discussion boards, exams, wikis (usually collaborative), case-based assignments (also usually written), and adaptive assignments ([Fuster 2017](#)). IWU’s LMS has four categories of activities: assignments (typically written but sometimes multimedia), discussions, quizzes, and virtual assignments.

four hours. Finally, “accelerated” describes a class that reduces the contact and work expectations usually associated with a traditional credit hour. A significant amount of research has been done on student experience and satisfaction in online-accelerated programs (e.g., Bielitz 2016; Gazza and Matthias 2016; Burke 2019; [Soles and Maduli-Williams 2019](#)). However, only a handful of studies, like Trekle (2013), which deals exclusively with graduate education, have analyzed the pedagogical/andragogical dynamics and learning outcomes of courses in such programs.

Under the Carnegie Unit system, a typical three-credit semester class has forty-five hours of in-class contact time and an additional ninety hours of out-of-class work for a total of 135 hours of learning activity ([International Affairs Office 2008](#)).⁴ Online asynchronous classes blur the in-class versus out-of-class division, but accelerated classes reduce the total number of hours of learning activity by varying degrees. Most of the classes that I teach (including BIL-202: Inductive Bible Study) aim for twenty-five to thirty hours of student work per credit hour, resulting in a three-credit class with approximately seventy-five to ninety hours of learning activity, which is forty-five to sixty fewer hours of contact/work than a traditional three-credit class. Thus, student learning is “accelerated” in that adult students supposedly learn material faster, or more efficiently, or more effectively, and thus can achieve the same learning outcomes in less time than traditional students (see further below under adult students). In my context at IWU, such accelerated learning is explained by two factors. First, adult students bring a host of life skills (e.g., time management, reading comprehension, application) that enable them to organize and process their learning more effectively. Second, adult learners bring a framework of existing knowledge that enables them to integrate new learning more efficiently rather than doing the harder and slower work of building such a framework (cf. the discussion of “knowledge structures” in Miller [2014, 99–102]). However, as will be discussed below, I have found that many of my adult students lack both of these capacities, confounding the theory that underlies acceleration from an andragogical perspective.

Good research has been done demonstrating that students *can* learn equally or even more effectively in compressed and/or accelerated formats (Floyd 2017; [Thornton, Demps, and Jadav 2017](#)). However, this research is complicated by the lack of clarification about exactly which kind of class is being studied (e.g., compressed classes are sometimes also accelerated but not always).⁵ Conflicting research also shows that time on task is a key factor in learning achievement (Boettcher and Conrad 2016, 39–40), that students retained learning better from eight-week compressed classes in comparison to five-week compressed or sixteen-week traditional versions (Deichert and Maxwell 2015), and that students in courses that were accelerated and compressed learned less than students in the traditional semester version of the course ([Bruehler 2014](#)). The acceleration and compression of courses limits the opportunities for repetition or recursivity, which has been cited as one of the keys to memory and learning (Inglis 2014, 70–72). Again, it should be noted that some major studies of accelerated, compressed, and intensive courses do not give serious consideration to the additional demands of a course being online or asynchronous. For example, Nilson and Goodson (2018, 156) assume that student workload is the same in online and face to face courses. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2010, 6) assume a face-to-face class as the most common format for intensive and accelerated classes. The courses under consideration in this case study are online, asynchronous, compressed (into five or six weeks), and accelerated (with only approximately eighty work hours). Each piece adds to the mixture of compounding constraints.

Modular

Continuing in the domain of time, most versions of this new kind of class are modular. Typically, at IWU and specifically in the BIL-202 class, the modules are built on time units rather than topics/content (contrast the content-based modular design explained by Shaw [2017]). Most adult undergraduate online classes at IWU are divided into week-long workshops that begin on Tuesday and end on the following Monday. Many assignments are introduced and completed within this one-week time span (e.g., discussions and quizzes), though some larger projects (like research papers) are threaded across several weeks with scaffolded assignments that build on one another. Often, modules will follow a predictable pattern to

4 While the Carnegie Unit has been subject to scrutiny and criticism, it is still the mostly widely used norm across higher education ([Silva, White, and Toch 2015](#)).

5 Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2010, 2) can differentiate between the shortened time window of “intensive” classes and the reduced contact and work time of “accelerated” courses. However, in much of the book they speak of “accelerated or intensive” courses together (as in the title) without any distinction between the dynamics of the two factors.

reduce the strain of students acclimating to a new set of instructions/assignments each week (though see Boettcher and Conrad 2014, 51). Other adult degree completion programs (e.g., Western Governors University) give students a flexible window of time to complete content-based modules. The week-long modules of adult, online classes at IWU may or may not overlap with natural content divisions, and research has shown that such modularized courses can lead to a fragmentation of knowledge (Cornford 1997). Only a limited amount of research has been done on the learning effects of modularization, and it primarily deals with content-based modules (that are time flexible) rather than time-based modules (e.g., Schlupe, Bettoni, and Guttormsen 2006).

Standardized

These courses at IWU are also standardized. This means that a single master course is created through the collaboration of subject matter experts, instructional designers, and academic administrators. This master course establishes everything for the class: materials, assignments, instructions, rubrics, and so on. This single master course is then copied into various sections and facilitated by contingent/adjunct faculty (and sometimes the course writer too). Adjunct instructors are generally not permitted to change anything in the live course and are responsible primarily to provide guidance to students, participate in discussion forums, and grade all assignments.

Course/curriculum standardization has been hailed as a solution to rising higher education costs (CCAP 2015) and as a way to improve quality while depoliticizing content choices (Ake-Little 2019). However, others have decried course/curriculum standardization as an outgrowth of entrenched political establishments. Such standardization can reinforce the status quo, reduce critical thinking, and undercut innovative research (Lucey and Lorschach 2012; Sparapani and Callejo Perez 2015). Standardization places severe limits on an instructor's ability to adapt a course to develop the engagement and agency of adult learners (as recommended by Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler [2000, 297–99]). While standardization raises important philosophical and political questions, the focus of this article is on the pedagogical dynamics that it introduces into courses. Degrees of disconnect and differences between the perspective of the course creators and the instructor may cause confusion or tension in the facilitation of the course (Bart 2010). Perhaps most importantly, instructors do not have the freedom to adjust the course in any way to adapt to students' interests or needs. Finally, again, key publications related to online education proceed on the basis that one is creating an online course for oneself to teach, not for someone else to teach (e.g., Miller 2014, 196–208; Jung 2015, 39–40).

Adult Learners Enter the Mix

The theory and practice of adult learning has become its own arena of study and practice in the past few decades. Knowles (1973) constructed an andragogical model that highlighted core assumptions about adults as learners. This model stresses that adult learners are self-directed, interested in the pragmatic results of learning, and desire to connect their learning to their experience (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2005, 64–68). However, Knowles is far from the only voice on adult learners, and his perspective has been critiqued as being based on ambiguous or untenable assumptions about a narrowly idealized adult learner (Hartree 1984; Darbyshire 1993) that have not been validated by empirical research (Taylor and Kroth 2009). Wlodkowski (2010, 5–6) stresses that adult students prioritize learning situations that respect their personhood and experience while stressing the relevance of what they are learning. Jarvis (2004, 67–117) takes more of a humanist approach grounded in empirical research and emphasizes adult learning as an existential enterprise of developmental experiences that contributes to the growth of a person holistically across their lifespan (emotionally, cognitively, socially, vocationally, and so on).

The andragogy-pedagogy divide has been blurred by the rise of “emerging adulthood” (Chiang and Hawley 2013) and the opening up of “adult” degree programs to traditional age college students.⁶ Adult, or non-traditional, learners typically take classes as part-time students, dealing with the challenges of financial need, lack of previous educational success, and the competing demands of full-time work and family (Kazis et al. 2007, 7–9; Kara et al. 2019, 13). In this complex

⁶ IWU lowered the enrollment age for adult degree completion programs from twenty-one to eighteen in 2013.

mix of adult learning research, my own experience leads me to three broad considerations as I approach teaching adult learners at IWU. First, many adult learners come to classes with an eagerness to learn but a relative lack of skills in formal education, especially around the crucial tasks of reading and writing (see also Means, Bakia, and Murphy 2014, 143–49). Second, almost all adult learners bring a deep and complex set of work and life commitments that leads them to squeeze formal education into the limited margins of their schedules. Finally, adult learners bring a wealth of life experiences that can sometimes facilitate and sometimes frustrate their learning.

Adult students who have prior experience with the subject matter and skills being taught in the course can often learn new content in the same arena more quickly and effectively by integrating their learning into already existing webs of knowledge and practice (Jarvis 2004, 251–52). However, adult learners in my classes often describe their accelerated learning experience as “drinking from a fire hose.” They recognize that they are getting a huge dose of information and practice that can quench a thirst, but they also subjectively experience this valuable learning as coming at them far too fast. Furthermore, accelerated and standardized classes have limited time to assess students’ existing knowledge-base and lack the flexibility to change the course appropriately (as suggested by Inglis [2014, 62–65]). Adult students can often fall into epistemological habits that cognitively and affectively privilege currently held beliefs and paradigms, thus hindering their learning process (Kasworm 2008, 31–32; Blair 1997, 16, 21).

This survey of online, asynchronous, accelerated, compressed, modular, standardized, and adult courses sets forth the various elements and dynamics that affect the creation and teaching of this kind of class in the context of adult degree completion programs. As noted above, each of these elements has been explored in-depth in several studies but mostly in isolation from one another. Occasionally, a book or article will consider two factors together (e.g., online-asynchronous, adult-accelerated, or standardized-modular). However, almost no studies examine three or more of these dynamics at the same time, despite the ways that they impinge on one another and create a scenario of compounding constraints that complicates the teaching-learning enterprise in this type of class. We turn now to consider some of the complications that I have encountered through the lens of a particular class.

The Complications of Compounding Constraints

As one who has written and facilitated several courses in this new paradigm, I begin by saying that the first compounding constraint is myself. Despite pursuing higher education through a doctoral degree, I have never taken a course that resembles the courses that I now teach. I lack the shared experience that would give me insight and sympathy into the learning experience of most of my adult students in these online classes, and I struggle to place myself as a learner in their shoes in order to craft practical and transformative learning experiences. The observations and reflections in this essay come from approximately ten years of teaching full-time in an adult degree completion program. I have had to make myself a student of my students and of this new kind of class, and I admit that there was much that I learned only through missteps and mistakes. This is compounded by the challenge of seeing through my years of study to my students’ current level of learning as relative novices.

I am also embedded in an institutional context. Accelerated-online-adult programs are shaped by the pragmatic and financial demands of the higher education marketplace, where programs must compete to offer working adults temporally and economically feasible pathways to a degree. These forces encourage practices like accelerated courses to make degrees achievable in a shorter time span and adjunct-instructed standardized courses that reduce costs. I am also a part of the educational culture of IWU which comes with its own norms such as time-based week-long modules and required asynchronicity in most undergraduate courses. These external forces can be pushed back to some degree, but they continue to form some of the constraints that intersect in this case study. I now will explore several constraints that have arisen from my own attempts in writing and teaching these courses, from the insights of my colleagues, and from relevant studies in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Undergraduate Biblical Interpretation

The example course under consideration in this case study is BIL-202: Inductive Bible Study.⁷ Students take prerequisite introductory courses in both Old Testament and New Testament. However, these two courses (also accelerated and compressed) are often not enough to adequately overcome the biblical illiteracy that can exist even among students enrolled in a degree in Christian Ministries (Hanson 2010; [Stetzer 2014](#)), especially with regards to the Old Testament. Additionally, many students find the Inductive Bible Study (IBS) method taught in this class to be overly academic and difficult to connect with their prior “devotional” or “spiritual” approaches to the Bible. These student quotes relate a common reaction:

To be honest, I do not like the IBS method at this point in time. I completely understand breaking down Scripture and making sure that I study it to get a more clear interpretation of what the Spirit is trying to lead me towards, but I feel like this method is personally taking part of that away from me. I feel like it is too methodical and is personally hindering what the Spirit is trying to help me realize.

This is very stressful. I am an emotional wreck. The truth is I am so nervous about doing the wrong thing that I am not having a spiritual experience at all. So, I am missing out on the benefit of this process.

These comments resonate with the dynamic noted by Newell:

Examining the cultural and literary nature of the Bible seemed to interfere with its signal as an inspiring and inspired document. Given the importance of the student’s faith commitment, coupled with a strong attachment to his previous way of reading the Bible, in retrospect it is not surprising that this new approach evoked serious resistance. (2003, 191)

Not all students experience this degree of cognitive dissonance, and some students even cite how this challenging new way of reading Scripture using literary and cultural tools has benefitted their spiritual life. Even those students who sense a spiritual benefit recognize that this is a new way of reading Scripture that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. This newness puts into play Jarvis’s assertion (mentioned above) that the key characteristic required for accelerated adult learning is not general life experience but familiarity with a particular body of knowledge or practice. These students may have years of experience in reading the Bible devotionally, but they have little to no experience with the discipline of critical biblical interpretation; therefore, they are not well prepared to learn interpretation in an accelerated format. In the case of BIL-202: Inductive Bible Study, undergraduate adult learners have less time than a traditional class to both critically evaluate previously formed reading habits and also learn a very different set of habits and principles. This is not learning that can take full advantage of the momentum of an adult learner’s set of pre-existing competencies but learning that involves reevaluating those habits and reintegrating them into a larger paradigm—work that is both cognitively and affectively demanding.

Parsing Materials

The next compounding constraint is that of appropriate materials. Many college-level textbooks are written for traditional, semester-length, non-compressed, non-accelerated classes. As an example, the book *Inductive Bible Study* by Fuhr and Köstenberger (2016) bills itself on the back cover as “an ideal textbook for courses in biblical interpretation.” This textbook has fifteen chapters—surely, it is not a coincidence that this is the same number of weeks as a traditional college semester. The textbook *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays 2012) has thirteen chapters devoted to interpretive method plus nine additional chapters devoted to particular biblical genres and an appendix on inspiration and canon. A compressed and accelerated course could only use approximately two-thirds of these textbooks at the most, leaving significant portions of the textbook out of the course. This is exacerbated by the fact that in an internal study at IWU adult students in accelerated

⁷ For those unfamiliar with the Inductive Bible Study Method, two common textbooks are Bauer and Traina (2011) and Duval and Hays (2012).

programs were shown to have poorer reading skills than students in traditional semester-length programs.⁸ Thus, our adult students, who tend to read more slowly, need to read the same amount of material in less time. Again, most adult students in BIL-202 do not have a store of relevant background knowledge that would allow certain portions of the reading to be omitted (and this is not to mention the number and scope of assignments that must similarly be truncated in some way). This is further complicated by trying to guide adult students through the course while they are also doing the hard work of reevaluating long-held beliefs about the Bible and their habits of reading it.

The rise of curatable materials and open educational resources offers both help and further challenge. Many valuable resources (both print and multimedia) are freely available online. However, my search to find relevant hermeneutical resources for a course in Bible study method has run into several roadblocks. There are simply not as many open educational resources in biblical studies as there are for many other fields. [OER commons](#), “a public digital library of open educational resources,” identifies four resources on the Bible at the college level that are primarily survey courses (not hermeneutics courses like BIL-202) and one stand-alone module on reading creation myths. The [MERLOT database](#) has several video lectures from an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible course and two other courses that are surveys of the Bible. There are online resources for learning IBS, but their diversity presents an additional complication. The [Seedbed website](#) houses some general descriptions, a handful of examples, a few videos, and several audio lectures about IBS. But these would need to be selected from and complemented by other materials to create a coherent college course. The [Navigators](#) have a brief overview of IBS, but it describes “paraphrasing” as one of the steps—a practice I explicitly discourage in my own classes. An online search for IBS resources brings up materials associated with Precept Ministries ([Precept](#) or [Precept Austin](#)). These resources present a more popular and overtly evangelical approach to IBS with several of its own distinctives and emphases. Different pieces from different theological and theoretical perspectives would have to be woven together in a kind of “Frankencourse” stitched together by the course writer. In my own experience, I have not had success at piecing together resources from different sources to create a coherent and effective learning experience for adult students in this new kind of class. The shifting voices, forms of presentation, theoretical frameworks, and ideological perspectives in each resource must be worked through by an adult student already struggling to make sense of this new approach in the midst of other long-standing commitments to Scripture and its interpretation while juggling the demands of life and work in an accelerated course.

Compressing Discussions

Discussion boards are a staple of asynchronous, online learning. Several studies have explored best practices in such discussions and documented notable gains in student learning, especially around critical thinking (e.g., [Foo and Quek 2019](#); [DiPasquale and Hunter 2018](#)). However, the modular, standardized, compressed, and accelerated nature of these courses forces several limits onto these discussions. First, almost all discussion boards take place within the time constraints of a single week-long module. I have organized BIL-202 into six modules that all work with Paul’s letter to the Colossians: An introduction to IBS, a paragraph observation, a book-length observation, two modules on interpretation, and then a final module on application. The course currently has one discussion in each module that explores the primary task of that week with initial examples. Additionally, modules three through six have another discussion that reflects back on the task and main assignment of the previous week (see further below on grading). However, the gradable discussion must occur within one week. Usually, a discussion gives the student until the end of day four of the module (typically Friday) to make an initial post. The instructions ask students to respond twice to classmates and once to the instructor by the end of the seventh day of the module (typically Monday).

This schedule usually results in an initial student post on Friday, instructor and classmate responses on Saturday and Sunday, and then some opportunity for continuation and redirection of the discussion briefly on Monday. The compressed, accelerated, and modular constraints typically limit discussions to one or two exchanges. This is further affected by the constraints of online communication, which mostly uses text-based posts (though video posts are becoming more

⁸ Quarters might also be considered “compressed,” transitioning a fifteen-week semester into ten weeks. However, quarter-based calendars (usually do not have to address the issue of acceleration (fewer time-on-task hours). Again, while moving from fifteen to ten weeks offers some challenges of sequencing, the primary driver under consideration for texts and reading here is that the adult students must be assigned less work than in a traditional three-credit (135 work hours) course.

common). These communication and timing issues can also be affected by the standardized nature of these discussions. When constructing a discussion, I often have discovery goals that I hope students will realize as they process the material. I do not state these overtly in the prompt or instructions, but allow them to emerge through the interactive learning of the discussion guided by the facilitator (as recommended by Cuthrell and Lyon [2007, 360–61]). However, such discovery goals are difficult to communicate to adjunct faculty who often teach the course. Instructor guides can be placed in our courses, but they are not frequently accessed. Also, adjunct faculty may come from other paradigms that do not see the importance of that goal or have different goals, thus guiding the discussion in other directions (a dynamic I have seen in many adjunct instructor observations). Because the course is standardized, discussion prompts are not supposed to be changed to address the interests or needs of a particular group of students, though they may be interjected alongside the primary discussion. In my experience, these discussion boards often fail to probe issues, engage in dialogue, and reach meaningful learning conclusions before the class must move on to a new set of discussions in the next time-based module. Many questions and issues must be left hanging, never to be returned to, in the pressing pace of these classes.

Frustrating Group Projects

Similar dynamics have led our department team to remove most group work from Bible classes in our adult degree completion program courses. Despite several attempts to reconceive of and reorganize group projects, our team of faculty, administrators, and instructional designers have not been able to find a satisfactory way to make group projects work successfully in this type of class with our students. This is also despite our shared belief that group work is important for developing team skills in our students and that Scripture is intended to be read in community. Group assignments are very difficult to complete in the scope of a week when communication is limited to email (and the occasional video chat or phone call) and when students must navigate tight schedules (many adult students do most of their work over the weekend). Scaffolding group work across multiple weeks/modules means potential confusion when the subject of that threaded group assignment is following a somewhat different track than the focus of the current module. One must also consider the precious limited time in an accelerated class. Extending group work for a particular assignment across multiple weeks means taking away time from other assignments that address the current module's primary topic and task. Each week must also have some kind of graded deliverable to induce students to complete the stages of group work. One article on best group practices states, "Providing two or three weeks to complete a group project online may not provide ample time . . . Consider designing group projects that span several weeks and build on the overall content of the course" (Scherling 2011, 15). However, these compressed classes barely last "several weeks." The time constraints of modules, compression, and acceleration complicate group collaboration in several ways.

Even when group assignments were carefully scaffolded, roles were clarified, and specific activities were built into the course, students repeatedly expressed frustration about time and communication constraints in end of course evaluations. One student said,

Group Projects are not helpful. They slow down individual study and productivity. I spent many unproductive hours waiting for others to complete their part of the project. I simply do not have time to wait on others in order to complete an assignment. Sometimes, others would not complete their part of the assignment until the last hour.

The work that was turned in by groups often failed to meet the intended outcomes of those assignments, and students would comment on the sub-standard nature of their work, citing the difficulties caused by the dynamics of group projects. Again, this is after repeated attempts to improve the group assignments based on research and best practices (as presented in Scherling [2011] and Stavredes [2011, 141–46]). We have kept a couple of simpler cooperative projects in the program, but have concluded that the compounding constraints of adult students in modular, standardized, accelerated, and compressed courses do not create a conducive environment for genuine collaboration.

Sequencing Assignments

The interrelated issues of sequencing and grading have presented perhaps the most unresolvable conundrum in the context of these courses. Recall that almost all modules are one week long. Instructors have up to seven days to return graded assignments to students according to IWU policy. IBS stresses that the observation of biblical passages should precede interpretation, which in turn precedes application. The steps are sequential, and the holistic nature of IBS upholds the integral role of each step in the method. Week/Module One provides an introduction to and overview of IBS. Then, students observe Colossians 3:1–4 for Week/Module Two. After this, they move immediately on to an observation of the book of Colossians as a whole in Week/Module Three, usually before receiving feedback on their detailed observation of 3:1–4. The survey of the entire book often causes students to realize new insights into their detailed observation, but the pace and length of the class prevents them from returning to that task. The insertion of the whole book observation in Week/Module Three at least gives the students time to receive their detailed observation back with some feedback before moving on to interpretation, which uses questions formulated in the detailed observation process. Then, in Week/Module Four of BIL-202 students interpret some aspect of Colossians 3:1–4 that they observed in Week/Module Two. They must then develop an application of the interpretation of that passage in Week/Module Five, most likely before they have received any feedback on their interpretation, which is not due back to students until the end of Week/Module Five.

This organization attempts to provide students the time to receive and act on feedback whenever possible. However, the pressures of the compressed class cannot be accommodated at all turns. Week/Module Six asks students to observe and interpret a passage of their own choosing from Colossians as a summative project. The book survey (from Week/Module Two) plays a bit of a role in this assignment, but this culminating assignment must take place in one week with only limited input and guidance on a discussion board that occurs simultaneously in that final week. In a non-compressed class, students could receive feedback on each step before needing to move onto the next. However, in this compressed version, flaws in a preceding step skew results in the next step, frustrating students and their learning. The compressed and accelerated nature of the class also prevents the final project from being scaffolded. It must be crammed into the final week with only the smallest opportunity for feedback during that same week. The demands of each week's/module's content, shortened by the accelerated format, do not leave space for scaffolded preparation for the final assignment. While the class scaffolds hermeneutical tasks according to the principles of IBS, the modules also tend to fragment from one another as students must keep pace with a new set of material each week with little time or incentive to learn from instructor feedback on previous assignments. The limited time period, modularized weeks, accelerated pace, and reasonable period of one week to complete grading make it very difficult to incorporate iterative practice, the interleaving of various activities, and spacing of similar activities across multiple sessions (all recommended by Miller [2014, 200]).

The Search for Strategies

The changes and suggestions below reflect my search for strategies to deal with the compounding constraints of the course. I have revised BIL-202: Inductive Bible Study twice in the past five years—with a major revision occurring five years ago and other minor revisions implemented two years later along with a few improvements since then. The survey below relates some of the changes that have been made to address the challenges of the course as well as offering possibilities for future changes. Of course, we offer far more than biblical interpretation courses in our religion and ministry programs for adults at IWU. These same challenges appear and similar strategies may be relevant for other courses offered in this format (preaching, theology, worship, church history, etc.). It is my hope that my search for strategies in the particular example of BIL-202 may illuminate new options and possibilities for other courses that share similar educational constraints.

Supporting Adult Learners

Small, practical adjustments employing the online and asynchronous dynamics of this course could be put in place to continue to ease some of the challenges adult students face in this type of class. Template documents for each IBS task were created and provided in this course in the last revision. (These templates were added into courses later in the program as well). The templates provide headings and formatting for each required component of a given step in IBS,

accompanied by comment reminders in the margins regarding the function of each section and what should be included in it. This saves busy adult students the work of formatting documents as well as providing real-time guidance while they are thinking through or writing up that specific task of the overall IBS method. Other possibilities for supporting adult learners might include a video interview with a previous (successful) student in the course in the first workshop (see the suggestion by Miller [2014, 182–83]). This would establish the relevance of the course for adult students, help incoming students imagine success in the course, and offer students strategies for successful learning. Next, gateways could be set up in the learning management system that require students to complete certain activities (e.g., complete a quiz or review feedback) before having access to later, larger assignments that build on these. Finally, as mentioned above, adult students have faced serious affective and spiritual challenges as this course (painfully) stretches their habits of reading Scripture. In light of these personal challenges, it may help their motivation if some early assignments are graded only for completion. Experience at IWU has shown that formative assignments must have points assigned to them to encourage students to complete them, but the threat or actuality of poor grades detracts from motivation. Discussion boards in the IWU online class culture often serve this formative function, but moving a skill into a full written assignment might provide better preparation for future summative assignments. Students can be given full feedback for some assignments (without the danger of a poor score) and thus digest the constructive feedback more effectively.

The culminating IBS assignment of the class allows students to choose their own passage from Colossians for observation and interpretation, following the principle of andragogy that adult students seek choices and self-determination. However, our adult students (with little to no experience in critical biblical interpretation) often feel paralyzed or flustered by this choice. Students have most of the final week for this integrating assignment, but they often express that they have a difficult time wrapping their minds around the process that they have just learned in a holistic fashion. From my perspective, students tend to choose passages that they already feel theologically comfortable with and then skew their work toward their presuppositions, following well-established cognitive habits (as noted above). Week/Module Two has students perform a detailed observation of Colossians 3:1–4. Alongside this selected passage, the materials could explain why 3:1–4 was chosen and point out other key passages in Colossians that students could begin to consider for their final project. Highlighting these critical passages would both give students some hints for their book survey (in Week/Module Three) and help them start thinking about the culminating study in Week/Module Six. This would allow for some scaffolding toward the culminating project and provide some guidance for their choices. This could assist our adult students who are adjusting to a new paradigm while facilitating steps toward self-direction (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler 2000, 300–301).

The Benefits and Costs of Focus

The previous version of the class used a typical semester-length textbook, and all its contents were squeezed into the six weeks. It covered the IBS method and had chapters on hermeneutics and various biblical genres, providing a well-rounded introduction to biblical interpretation. However, this led to students skimming the long readings and having very little time for actual interpretive work on the biblical text. At the major revision, I addressed this challenge by creating all of my own materials for the class, focusing on the IBS method and removing supporting material on hermeneutics and genre. Each module includes a document that describes that step in detail, complete with bulleted lists, charts, and appropriate graphics. These are complemented by a series of accompanying examples on 1 Peter (a detailed observation, book survey, interpretation, and application). These examples are provided in document form, but I also created screencast videos where I walk through each example clarifying processes, techniques, and principles presented in the written IBS guides. One challenge is that creating materials like this probably doubles the workload of writing a course, but it concentrates the learning materials and assessments so that they can directly address the narrowed aims of the learning outcomes in accelerated and compressed courses for adults. Creating your own course materials allows for an even better fit with backward design and the benefits such design brings (Reynolds and Kearns 2017). Thus, the creation of a class in this new format often requires the creation of appropriately focused materials, amounting to nearly the production of a short textbook.

The new materials resulted in a more direct and more manageable class for adult students, but it also removed a substantial amount of supporting material on hermeneutics and genre, leaving only a narrow focus on the IBS method and epistolary material in the New Testament. We also removed any collaborative assignments, judging that we did not have a suitable

solution to this challenge yet. These changes resulted in a class that students find more streamlined and convenient with no noticeable decrease in related learning outcome achievement. These continuing challenges in the revisions have led me to reconsider the outcomes of the course with laser focus and clear limitations. The accelerated and compressed nature of the course, further restricted by its asynchronous, online, modularized, standardized, and adult dynamics, means that I must scale back broad course outcomes and focus them on very specific tasks, sacrificing broader understanding and literacy in hermeneutics and biblical studies for the necessary elements that can be achieved within these constraints. However, this can limit the development of a student's larger web of knowledge. Removing supporting materials prevents the emergence of various "spokes, chains, and nets" that support the integration and memory of new skills and information (Kinchin 2016, 35–52; Miller 2014, 99–102).

Fortunately, most adult degree completion programs work with a predetermined sequence of courses and few electives. Many, though not all, students who take BIL-202 will go on to take further Bible classes that have this course as a prerequisite. That means elements like hermeneutics that can be taken out of this course can be woven into later required courses. Some consideration of hermeneutics is now incorporated into a later class which also has students use the IBS method on prophetic writings to provide some diversity of experience with different biblical genres. It might also be possible to remove the final, culminating project from BIL-202 with the plan to incorporate a more independent IBS project of this type into a later course. The constraints still exist within each course, but the ability to know the sequence of courses allows for one to consider how outcomes and goals can be scaffolded across an entire program, ameliorating some of the pressures present in any one course. This means that the curriculum map of the program and knowledge of assignments and emphases within each particular class provide crucial context for developing or revising any particular class so that all the pieces of this puzzle can fit together into a pathway of learning.

Adaptive Learning

Adaptive learning technologies allow for the construction of quiz-like activities that evaluate a student's answer, provide appropriate pre-loaded video and/or text feedback (whether right or wrong), and then direct the student to either review questions/material (if the answer was wrong) or toward harder or new material (if the answer was right) in real time. Adaptive learning platforms include programs like [Realizeit](#) and [Smart Sparrow](#), which have been shown to have beneficial results on student learning and engagement ([Shelle et al. 2018](#); Dziuban et al. 2016; see [various studies](#) collected at Realizeit). The IBS method entails sequenced steps. The three basic steps are observation, interpretation, and application. Each one of these steps has associated principles and techniques. Currently, students must practice these within the limited scope of a one-week discussion and then learn through their mistakes in the major assignment for each week. This is frustrating for students who feel that they do not have a decent grasp of a task before being asked to carry it out in a graded assignment. There is simply little opportunity for preparatory practice or review.

An adaptive learning program could contain a large bank of shorter, objective, scaled exercises that ask students to apply what they encountered in the documents and examples on IBS to biblical texts. These would be graded on a completion/competence basis—as soon as students reached a certain level of competence according to the scaled questions, they would receive full credit. Each module would have its own focused set of activities (e.g., Week/Module Two focusing on observation), but students would be able to return to these for more practice if desired, and some elements of earlier modules could be included in later modules to interleave the learning and reduce some of the modular fragmentation. These adaptive learning tools fit the standardized nature of the course. They would both norm some differences across various instructors and reduce the grading workload to allow more time for feedback on major assignments. Adaptive learning technology requires significant investment both on the part of the institution to support the technology and on the part of the course development team to build the program for the particular course. However, it holds the promise to increase adult students' sense of agency, provide for effective practice, and be a more efficient learning tool in a compressed and accelerated class (Miller 2014, 183–84).

Decompressing Learning

The sequencing of grading remains an unsolved dilemma. Currently, students are asked to discuss the feedback from their previous assignment starting on day four of a week/module, even though our policy states that instructors do not need to have graded assignments back until day seven. As the course writer, I know of this rhythm change, and we inform all of our adjuncts who teach this course about it, but we still run into occasional timing problems with the grading and discussions. Even I occasionally have schedule demands that make it difficult to get assignments graded and returned in less than four days.

A possible strategy to address this would require substantive innovation in the course delivery practices of the institution—decompressing the class from six weeks to twelve weeks. Boettcher and Conrad (2016, 79–104) use the paradigm of four phases to construct an online course, but that means only one-and-a-half weeks per phase in a six-week course! Spacing out the course over more weeks would allow for more effective engagement, better scaffolding of assignments, and ample time to receive and learn from feedback. This change would have students take two three-credit classes at the same time (BIL-202 and another class). This could also be done with another course that is particularly constrained by compression, resulting in a dual benefit. While this would not affect the online, asynchronous, accelerated, modular, standardized, or adult dimensions of the class, at least it would remove the constricting dynamics created by the compressed nature of the course. It would also enable students to still complete two courses in twelve weeks in keeping with the accelerated program pace for working adults.

This could take a couple of different formats. Two courses could run simultaneously with students putting six to eight hours of work into each class each week (rather than twelve to sixteen hours of work into one course). This has the downside of potentially dividing students' attention or complicating their cognitive load by requiring them to shift between two courses/disciplines. Or, courses could alternate weeks with BIL-202 one week, then a week on another class, back to BIL-202, and so on. This would allow time for grading and feedback but could create an even greater sense of disjunction between the modules of each course. These formats would have to be evaluated for their effectiveness to see if the easing of the compression of the class is outweighed by any negative consequences of these scheduling innovations.

CONCLUSION

Learning to teach and create online, asynchronous, accelerated, compressed, modular, standardized, and adult undergraduate courses in Biblical studies is an ongoing journey for me. For the first several years, I did my best to learn the format and work within it, exploring each dynamic of the class for its strengths and weaknesses. As I engaged in writing courses, I began to see more clearly how these various dynamics impinged upon one another, and I felt the compounding constraints constrict the teaching-learning options available to me and my students. As I turned to research in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I found some particular insights on particular elements (e.g., formulating good discussions), but I also often discovered that crucial dynamics that I had to work within (e.g., week-long modules) were not considered. Over time, have found some techniques that can thread this narrow path, tried some approaches that have not worked successfully, and continued to search for strategies and tools that will facilitate profound learning in my students. This case study is a part of that journey, both reflecting back on it and envisioning some possible ways to move forward. My hope is that it offers a bit of hard-earned wisdom for others to use and prompts further research and insight into how to build and teach this new type of class.

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