"Cyber" Barth

Simon Smith

Abstract

“This article describes a study of the theology of Karl Barth carried out by four students at Memphis Theological Seminary who used the Internet and e-mail in addition to other means for learning. Dr. Donald K. McKim taught the class and here describes the way in which the class was structured, how students used the World Wide Web, a Newsgroup in which students participated, and their use of e-mail to amplify discussion. McKim indicates the advantage of using these resources which introduced students to a "new world" of media and unique resources, linked them with others throughout the world who also had an interest in Barth, and provided an enhanced means of communication for the students with each other and with the professor. He also provides further reflections about the experience in relation to seminary teaching." (p.183)

Comments

McKim provides a well-balanced summary of his use of multimedia techniques with a small group (four) of seemingly highly-motivated students. While he considers the 'experiment' to be a success, he does not make any great claims for new technology, properly seeing as a means to an end. This would seem to be a sensible approach as in this way the content of the course does not get lost in the technology. While, on the whole, the course seems to have been sensibly handled one might question the author's initial introduction of Barth by showing four hours of his lectures on videotape. This aside, however, the progress of the students, as described, shows that the methods used have clearly been beneficial to them. McKim encouraged them to utilise a number of multimedia resources that may not have been considered in a more conventional course, such as websites and existing newsgroups. Importantly McKim's involvement in the course seems to have been constant, particularly through email contact. This enabled him to monitor the progress of the students, and the group as a whole. Through threaded email discussion students have been able to contribute fully to the course around their considerable commitments.

The methods adopted by McKim underline the benefits that can be attained by using technology in a sensible and considered way. The fact that this has worked must, in part, be down to a careful application of technology to particular needs. This would, perhaps, be more difficult with a larger and/or less well motivated group since a considerable amount of time would be needed to support each student individually.