

# Successfully Teaching Biblical Languages Online at the Seminary Level: Guiding Principles of Course Design and Delivery

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**Abstract.** *Reformed Theological Seminary's Virtual Campus has successfully taught the biblical languages online since 1999. This article describes the theoretical principles that underlie the design and asynchronous delivery of online Greek and Hebrew to part-time adult distance students. The structure and administration of the courses is discussed, as well as how the students interact with their instructor and with the material. The fields of Adult Education, Learner Autonomy, and Distance Education suggest that online students must learn differently than traditional in-class students by being more responsible for their learning. Research also suggests that online instructors must teach differently, assuming a role more like a learning coach. Finally, the literature suggests that institutions must interact with distance students differently than traditional in-class students. The article concludes with a definition of "success" in these courses and description of the time commitment expected of faculty in these courses.*

## Introduction

Reformed Theological Seminary's Virtual Campus has been offering the biblical languages online for over seven years. New Testament Greek has been available online since the summer of 1999; online Hebrew since the summer of 2001. Over 800 students have availed themselves of this opportunity from several locations around the world – including military personnel, foreign nationals, and missionaries, as well as students from residential campuses of Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) and from other seminaries and undergraduate programs.

The online biblical language program at RTS Virtual has been very successful. The dropout rate is around 12 percent. The average grade in online Greek I is ninety-two and in Greek II is eighty-nine. Some students who have finished RTS Virtual Greek have gone on to exege-

sis or Greek reading classes at a residential campus. They report feeling that they were at least as well prepared as any others in the class, and that they performed satisfactorily. RTS New Testament professors from several campuses agree that students from RTS Virtual Greek have a good foundation in the basics of Greek grammar and syntax, and that there is no discernable difference between the skill level of Virtual online students and other students. The average grade in online Hebrew I is ninety-five and in Hebrew II is ninety-three. Students and professors alike report satisfaction levels similar to those of online Greek.

What accounts for the success of these online language courses at the seminary level? This article will describe the theoretical background of the principles that guided the design and delivery of RTS Virtual's online language courses, and how the courses were designed and delivered. The article will conclude with a definition of "success" for these courses and some possible reasons for this success.

## Theoretical Background

Adult educator Cyril Houle claimed "education is fundamentally the same wherever and whenever it occurs. It deals with such basic concerns as the nature of the learner, the goals sought, the social and physical milieu in which instruction occurs, and the techniques of learning or teaching used. These and other components may be combined in infinite ways" (1996, 29–30). If education is fundamentally the same, no matter when and where it occurs, then what is the difference between theological seminary teaching and learning of Greek and Hebrew in the classroom and that done online? Houle's four components of education provide a useful framework in which to build such a discussion. We will examine each of them in turn, with the exception of

“goals sought.” The discussion will address this topic under “Course Design and Delivery” below.

### The Nature of the Learner

*Adult education/andragogy.* Houle’s first universal component of education, the nature of the learner, is a very important issue for seminary educators. The 2004–2005 Annual Data Tables of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (2005) reported that 62 percent of M. Div. or General Theological Studies students were over thirty years of age. Moreover, 33 percent of M. Div. or General Theological Studies students were over forty. One can argue, then, that it behooves a theological seminary to have at least a basic understanding of the adult learner. And since online students tend to be older than classroom students, adult learning theory is even more important for theological education at a distance.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) posited two useful criteria for classifying adulthood. First, an adult is one who is performing social roles normally assigned to adults in their respective cultures, that is, worker, spouse, parent, citizen, and so on. Second, an adult is one who perceives him- or herself as essentially responsible for his or her own life. Such a person, argued Knowles, tends to approach learning in a different fashion than a child or adolescent.

It was Knowles who introduced the European concept of andragogy (from the Greek *andra* “man” + *ago* “to lead”) to North America, calling it a “new label and a new technology” of adult learning (1968, 351). He later redefined andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (1980, 43). Knowles sought to distinguish this from pedagogy, the art and science of helping children learn. He characterized adult learners by five attributes:

1. being self-directed;
2. having a rich pool of experience, which provides a basis for constructing new knowledge;
3. being in a social role that makes them ready to learn;
4. being problem- or pragmatic-centered in their learning;
5. being internally motivated to learn.

From these five assumptions, Knowles argued for a program-planning model for designing, practicing, and evaluating adult education.

Knowles’s andragogy proposition sparked much debate, and has had its critics (Jarvis 1984; Merriam, Mott, and Lee 1996; Brookfield 1998). Knowles later refined his position, and described andragogy as “a model of assumptions about how people learn” (1984, 112). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to defend

andragogy; suffice it to say that the principles cited by Knowles are useful when thinking about designing adult education in general, and adult distance education in particular. Perhaps Kember summed it up best when he suggested, “Andragogy need only be accepted as a good guide for effective teaching of adults” (1995, 13). Indeed, Merriam (2001) calls andragogy one of the two pillars of adult learning theory, and one of the field’s most important theory-building efforts (the other being Self-Directed Learning [Houle 1961; Tough 1967]).

Finally, two important generalizations about *adult* students merit mention. First, most adult students work at least part-time and therefore must incorporate part-time study into a plate already full with work, family, and social commitments. This results in their sacrificing some things in life, negotiating others, and seeking support from family and others who are affected by the demands of study. Studies have reported that work, family, and social demands conflict with part-time adult students’ attempts to study (Home 1998; Kemp 2001; Shin and Kim 1999; Yum, Kember, and Siaw 2001). Something has “to give” (Kember and Leung 2004). Yum, Kember, and Siaw (2001) identified three mechanisms employed by part-time adult students to “walk the gauntlet” of studying while busy with a full life: (1) sacrifice, (2) support, and (3) negotiation of arrangements. These three operate in four domains of the student’s life: (1) self, (2) work, (3) family, and (4) social. Although any student must employ most of these mechanisms at any level of education, work, family, and social domains play a much larger role for the part-time adult student than for the traditional, full-time student.

Secondly, adult students often enroll because they perceive a return on their investment of time, money, and effort (Yum, Kember, and Siaw 2001). And since they finance much of their education themselves, they seek to protect their investment by setting higher goals for their achievement, by being more motivated, and by seeking opportunities to integrate what they learn with life and work experiences (Benshoff and Lewis 1992).

*Learner autonomy/self-direction.* Moore and Kearsley (2005) propose that the less structured a course is (allowing for flexibility) and the lower the degree of dialogue there is between teacher and learner, the greater the degree of self-direction required of the learner. Moore calls this self-direction “learner autonomy” (Moore 1972). He points out that if we only think of how we *teach* distance education, without considering the learner’s ability to self-direct his or her own study, our thinking will be flawed. Such autonomy on the part of the learner, argues Moore, is an asset to be employed by the distance educator. Moore argues that autonomous learners seek to formulate problems themselves, gather information for themselves, and evaluate their own progress. Along the way, they seek direction from

the outside, direction that does not intrude or seek to control them, but rather seeks to guide and assist them. Thus, from Moore, as well as from Knowles and other adult educators, we see that learner autonomy/self-direction is a key factor in understanding adult learning.

### *Principles of Distance Education*

Houle's second universal component of education is the social and physical milieu of instruction. The preceding discussion deals with part of the "social environment" of adult distance education (the nature of the learner). More will be said of this below. For now, the physical setting of distance education will occupy center stage.

*The physical milieu of distance education.* If, as Houle argues, all education is virtually the same, then what is distance education? And how does it differ from traditional, face-to-face instruction? Keegan (1986) offered what has become a widely accepted definition of distance education. The five criteria he posits that distinguish distance education from face-to-face courses, or even independent study, are:

1. the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process;
2. the influence of an institution or organization in learning, providing materials and ongoing student support;
3. the use of technology as a major medium of delivery of course content;
4. the provision of two-way communication between learner and teacher;
5. the quasi-permanent absence of a learning group throughout the length of the learning process; students are usually taught as individuals.

Number four above distinguishes distance education from independent study. As for number five, with the advent of teleconferencing, real-time interaction by all students with the teacher and each other is now possible. Thus, the last characteristic is somewhat dated from the days of print-based distance education. With this exception, Keegan's definition is still widely accepted.

Two important variables in education are time and place, that is, *when* the learning occurs and *where*. This has important implications for any course, concerning such issues as design, delivery, evaluation, and more. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2000) note four learning scenarios in this regard. One scenario is *same-time/same-place*. This is the traditional classroom where all students are present with the instructor at the same time. A second scenario is *different-time/same-place*. An example of this would be a learning- or tutoring-lab, where the instructor is always there, but students come at different times. These first two are

traditional learning scenarios, where the instructor and student(s) are together in person.

The next two scenarios represent distance education. *Same-time/different-place* is where the instructor and student(s) are together at the same time, but are not in the same place; indeed, they may all be in different places. Examples of this would be live television broadcasts or live Web conferencing. This is called *synchronous* distance education. The final scenario for learning is *asynchronous* distance education, or *different-time/different-place*. In asynchronous distance education, learners choose when and where they want to learn, and when and where they want to access learning materials. Moreover, they are separated from both the instructor and from each other, since each student is learning when and where he or she desires.

A major part of any learning process is the exchange of information between a learner and a teacher. As Moore (1972) points out, the communication between teacher and learner in traditional education (which he terms "contiguous teaching") is instant, spontaneous, and even emotionally motivating – delivered through a human voice, with the instructor and learners together in person. To this communication one could add body language as well. These elements, of course, do not typically happen in distance education (which Moore refers to as "distance teaching"); the teacher and learner are separated from each other.

This is arguably the single most important difference between distance education and traditional, face-to-face instruction. This separation of teacher and learner removes a vital link of communication (Keegan 1986). Or as Moore and Kearsley (2005) put it, this separation creates a communication gap – a psychological space that holds potential for misunderstanding. Thus the challenge of the distance educator is to understand this gap, and to seek to close as much of it as possible. And the most obvious means of closing this gap is media, for it provides the vehicle for the exchange of information between the distance teacher and distance learner.

Two important aspects in understanding the gap created by distance education are (1) all teaching involves a transaction, not only teaching by distance; and (2) the gap is a matter of pedagogy, not geography. Concerning teaching as a transaction, Rumble (1986) noted that all teaching and learning involves a transaction, even when teacher and learner are together. We must understand that, even in face-to-face instruction, there is a considerable, multi-faceted gap that must be bridged between the teacher and the learners – concerning matters such as: the difference between the knowledge of the teacher and that of the learner, background differences (culture, language, education, learning style, etc.), differences in course expectations, and more. These same differences exist in distance education, with the added gap of the absence of the teacher from learner

and the learners from each other. Yet in both cases, the gap is closed by the manner and means through which the instructor exchanges information with the students. However, while the face-to-face instructor does so in person, the distance instructor must exchange information through media.

The mode of communication is what highlights the major difference in the gap that must be crossed in distance education. Because of the central role of media in distance education, one should not simply take a traditional, instructor-centered course and put it on the Web. The course should be designed with the realization that media is the means of communication. Moreover, this realization will affect the manner in which the instructor communicates with the students. The gap is thus, as Moore and Kearsley note, a “pedagogical” one (2005). And closing this gap requires distance teaching, which Moore defines as:

the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those that in contiguous (i.e., conventional) teaching would be performed in the learner’s presence, so that communication between the learner and the teacher must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other devices. (1972, 76)

Moore & Kearsley (2005) cite two special types of teaching behaviors which instructors use to close this gap: dialogue and structure. Dialogue is the exchange of words, ideas, actions, and so forth between teacher and learner. Course structure consists of objectives, content, presentation, visual aids, and so on.

*Dialogue.* In distance courses, there are varying degrees of dialogue, depending on course content, instructional philosophy, and the personalities of the instructor and students. As always with distance education, course designers and instructors must be ever mindful of the gap caused by distance, and the feelings of isolation and uncertainty, which it can create (Care 1995; Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy 2000; Granger and Benke 1995). Instructors must realize that most students will never see them in person, cannot merely raise their hand when they get confused, and may not be able to get reassurance easily from others in the course. Therefore, instructors must maximize their use of dialogue to attempt to close the distance education gap.

Consequently, feedback from the instructor or tutor to students is essential in distance courses, and must be prompt, clear, and instructive. When students are studying in the isolation of many distance courses, their concerns must be quickly addressed. Otherwise, they may lose confidence in themselves and become less motivated.

Another important way to narrow the distance education gap is dialogue between the distance institution

and the student, since media and technology play a central role in course delivery. Students need quick, convenient access to faculty and staff concerning issues such as course materials, assignments, registration, access to materials, and more. The institution must make every effort to respond promptly to all student concerns and needs, being ever mindful of the gap caused by distance education.

*Structure.* Course designers and instructors can maximize their use of course structure to attempt to close the gap caused by distance education and the feelings of isolation and uncertainty that it can create. The course should be designed with the realization that most students will never see the instructor in person; indeed, many students may never ever hear the instructor’s voice! When thinking through how to close the distance education gap through course structure, it is necessary to think through every instructional process and all content used when teaching in the classroom and consider how these should best be done in a distance format. In addition, it is necessary to think about materials that need to be prepared for distance teaching that are not used in the classroom.

In distance courses it is important for students to know how they are doing. Therefore, answer keys for all assignments are needed. And when learning a language – even if it is not one currently spoken – it is necessary to provide the aural element of the language through tapes, CDs, or MP3s.

With any instruction, redundancy is a key element of the effective course structure. And with the isolation of distance study, redundancy can be even more important in helping a student know what to expect when he or she is tested.

Finally, distance courses should be designed and delivered to set the students up for success. Goals, objectives, readings, assignments – all aspects of the course – should be structured in such a way as to smoothly walk the student through what to expect in the course and how to do well in the course. All of this is part of using structure to close the distance education gap – which is, after all – a pedagogical one (Moore and Kearsley 2005).

*The social milieu of distance education: Learner-centered instruction.* Barr and Tagg (1995) noted a shift in higher education which they called the “Learning Paradigm.” Instead of institutions seeing themselves as existing to provide instruction, some were seeing their purpose as to produce learning, by whatever means works best for every student. In this new paradigm the task of an institution of higher learning is not the transfer of knowledge, but rather the creation of environments and experiences that assist students in discovering and constructing knowledge for themselves. In a learning paradigm, “the chief agent in the process is the

learner” (Barr and Tagg 1995). Wlodkowski has made a similar point with regard to teaching and motivating adults: “the learner’s perspective is fundamental” (Wlodkowski 1999, 9).

In such a model, students are more responsible for their learning and responsible for more of their learning. Students can be freed to decide such things as when and where to learn, and at what pace. The learner is respected as an experienced, competent individual who learns best by being guided through the material by the instructor, not by merely having the instructor deliver content. This emphasis on the central role of the learner is an important part of the different social milieu of asynchronous distance education.

### *Techniques of Teaching and Learning*

Houle’s final universal component of education is the techniques of teaching and learning used. The central issue in distance education is the separation of teacher and learner: they are usually or constantly in a different place, and most often at a different time. The gap caused by distance education, and the nature of the part-time adult student, require at least three changes in the teaching/learning process: learners must learn differently, teachers must teach differently, and institutions must relate to distance students differently.

*Learners must learn differently.* Distance learning does not fit every learner. In fact, some forms of distance education may represent an epistemological shift for students used to a traditional, lecture based class. In most online courses, the primary means of instruction is not personal contact with the instructor. Instead of a live encounter with a person whom they can see, hear, and question (and who can do the same with them), online students receive all or most instruction through media. Consider the aforementioned gap created by distance education. The wider this gap, the larger the role the personal characteristics of the learner play in the learning process. This means that distance students are responsible for more or most of their learning (Sherry 1996). They need to be able to assess their educational needs, design or plan learning, locate and use resources, generate learning goals, and evaluate how well they are reaching those goals – all with minimal dependence on or input from others. The isolation of asynchronous learning requires that students be self-directed and intrinsically motivated. In addition, they must be self-starters, must stay on task, must be motivated to persist in the face of difficulties and isolation, and must have self-monitoring skills that ensure effective study habits and strategies.

*Teachers must teach differently.* Since the primary means of instruction is not face-to-face, the online

instructor must be prepared to deliver all instruction through media. As Essex and Cagiltay note (2001), almost every facet of the process of education is different with a distance course, especially an online course: class discussions are replaced with email or chat rooms; hand-outs are replaced by Web pages; and assignments are uploaded or Web based rather than handed in or slipped under the professor’s door. Consequently, the role of the instructor is radically altered. He or she is a designer of carefully organized and presented learning environments – more of a coach or resource person for learners. With self-directed, adult students at a distance, the instructor’s role is one of facilitator or “guide on the side,” not “sage on the stage.” As Brookfield (1986) states it, facilitators are not didactic instructors, but rather resources for learning. As such, the material itself must be carefully organized and presented.

In addition, the relationship between a facilitator and a student differs from that between a teacher and a student. Tough (1979, 183) lists four characteristics of a “helpful” facilitator:

1. They are warm, loving, caring, and accepting of their learners.
2. They have a high regard for the self-planning competencies of the learner.
3. They view themselves as participating in a dialogue of equals when communicating with their learners.
4. They are open to change, and seek to learn from their helping experience.

Wlodkowski (1999) lists similar characteristics of instruction that keep adults motivated.

Finally, as was noted above, instructors must be careful to respond quickly and clearly to distance students. Dialogue between teacher and learner is one of two central teaching behaviors at the center of Moore and Kearsley’s (2005) theory of transactional distance. Feedback helps students gauge their progress and their feelings about their chances for success. Graham Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2000) evaluated a series of online courses and found that prompt feedback was among the critical factors in success in online courses. Care (1995) reported similar findings.

*Institutions must relate differently.* Institutions must interact with part-time distance students differently than with traditional in-class students. Since most or all contact between the student and institutional representatives (instructor, tutor, registrar, cashier, etc.) is through media, the institution must relate differently with busy, part-time adult distance students. Polson (2003) argues that the quality of the graduate experience is in part a function of the student services offered. This is also true in distance education. Institutions must recognize the different lifestyle of part-time adult distance

students, due to their multiple roles. They must design, deliver, and support courses centered on the students' needs and preferences. Moreover, the institution must be readily available to the distance student. Shin (2003) found that the availability of the institution was more important to distance students than the availability of the teacher or of one's learning peers. By designing and delivering courses that are geared to the needs and desires of part-time distance students, and by providing convenient, personable support to its distance students, an institution can lower or remove institutional barriers to distance education and help to minimize student feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

### Course Design and Delivery

Since all learning involves a transaction, and since distance learning involves a special pedagogical gap that must be transacted (Moore and Kearsley 2005), a special set of teaching and learning behaviors is needed to close this gap. Again, Houle's components of education provide a useful framework for this discussion.

#### *The Nature of the Learner at RTS*

Knowing that the average age of our students was forty, and relying on adult education theory, Reformed Theological Seminary designed its online language courses for older, more mature adults. We assumed that such students are self-directed autonomous learners, that their experiences and position in life provide impetus for learning, and that they are motivated to learn. RTS Virtual views such characteristics of the adult learner as assets to the learner and ones to be exploited.

Conventional wisdom suggests that busy, part-time adults trying to integrate studies into an already busy schedule might encounter even more challenges to motivation and learning when studying at a distance. We knew that motivation has been a problem in distance courses. The boom in online education of the mid-to-late 90s had received mixed reviews. Higher education administrators reported completion rates in distance courses to be ten to fifty percentage points lower than in traditional face-to-face courses (Carr 2000). Some suggested that the challenges of distance education could result in a lack of student motivation, contributing to dropout (Galusha 1997). Thus we sought to capitalize on the motivation of our adult students and do what we could to maintain and foster it through the way we designed and delivered the course.

In addition to averaging forty years of age, we knew that most of our students worked at least part-time, and were married. Many of our students have children, and many of their spouses work; some also have commitments to aging relatives. Consequently, we know that our students must incorporate study into a plate already

full with work, family, and social commitments. RTS Virtual's online language courses recognize this tension, this "struggle to juggle" multiple responsibilities and commitments to job, family, and community. It is for a target audience such as this that we designed and deliver our online biblical language courses.

### Course Goals

From an instructional design standpoint, a first step in any course design should be the course goals (Hannum and Hansen 1989). What did we want our online language students to learn, and how would we know if they had learned it? We took an outcome-based, measurable goals and objectives approach. For example, we determined what we wanted students to be able to do at the end of Greek and Hebrew I and II (to read a narrative with a lexicon and minimal grammatical/syntactic aid). Then, working backward, we determined what skills and knowledge they needed to accomplish these goals (objectives), and what exchange of information between instructor and students would be necessary to facilitate the learning of these goals. Finally, we designed new or employed existing assessments to measure, with specificity, whether or not students were obtaining those objectives and goals. Having clear course goals is also a factor in motivation, since they provide impetus for and direction to one's actions aimed at learning (Pintrich and Schunk 1996).

A more global approach was taken in the courses, focusing on recognition of material for translation, as opposed to the reproduction of voluminous material from memory. RTS Virtual online language courses use a unit- or modular-based approach, meaning that the course is broken down into smaller units based on material covered. These divisions are based either on the textbooks used or on the course content itself. Goals and objectives are clearly stated for each larger unit or module. Assessment is provided for each smaller unit (chapter or lesson). This way both the student and the instructor can see student progress and intervene with remedial methods at many key points in the course.

#### *The Social and Physical Milieu at RTS*

The ever-present communication gap of distance education drove RTS Virtual's design and delivery of the online biblical language courses. We knew from the start the courses would be delivered totally at a distance, asynchronously. This meant no required face-to-face time between instructor and student, or between students and each other. Indeed, such was not even possible for many students, who live in other states or countries. We sought to close this gap by the effective use of dialogue and course structure (Moore and Kearsley 2005).

*Dialogue.* RTS Virtual online language courses employ several means of exchanging words and ideas between instructor and student. There are HTML Web lectures for students to read, with explanatory notes. These Web pages are rather highly structured, and seek to anticipate every question that a student may have while reading the material. They are the primary means of instructor-to-student contact. Students then email or call the instructor with any questions they may have.

Feedback in RTS Virtual online language courses happens through browser-based input and personal input. Students receive feedback on certain Web-based learning tools. Answers to exercises are available online as separate Web pages in HTML format. There is also instantaneous, one-click feedback on parsing drills and practice exams. Also, when students submit online exams or quizzes, they instantly see their answers alongside the correct answers. So while they do not know their grade until the assignment is graded, they can immediately see how their answers match up with the correct ones. Through Web-based feedback, students quickly know how they are doing on the material, and in what areas, if any, they are struggling. This is helpful because they can then initiate contact with the instructor while the material is fresh in their minds, without having to wait for the instructor or tutor to grade the assessment.

As the instructor for both Greek and Hebrew, I give personal feedback to my students in several ways. Each time an exam or quiz is graded, the student receives an email with detailed information about what he or she missed. Students usually receive this written feedback within one week of taking the exam or quiz. Also, I send a regular “checking in” email every three to four weeks to all online language students. The purpose of this email is to see how the students are doing in their studies, to encourage them, to see if they have any questions, to remind them of their progress, and to remind them that, while RTS Virtual language courses are self-paced, they are not do-it-yourself courses; the instructor is ever at the ready to help them in any way. Personal encouragement can be a contributing factor to motivation (Bandura 1986). Phone tutoring is also available for any student who requests it.

In a traditional face-to-face class, instructors regularly make educational transactions by having a question-and-answer period, reviewing for exams, or fielding questions on the fly while lecturing. Hence, they can often spot potential areas of confusion for students. This, of course, cannot happen in RTS Virtual language courses. I do not go over the exam afterwards with the whole class, as in a traditional face-to-face course. I must trouble-shoot each exam separately, diagnose student deficiencies, and then communicate with each student personally about what they missed, where I think they may be confused, and how I think it can be remedied.

Since students cannot merely stop me in real time and ask questions, I attempt to anticipate as many questions as possible. This is very important, since once students do ask a question by email or phone, they will have to wait for an answer. When students contact me with questions, I try to drop everything I am doing and answer as soon as possible. In my responses, I make an effort to communicate to them in an affirming, encouraging manner that respects their questions, their views, and their thought processes.

It is essential that my feedback be prompt, clear, and instructive. Otherwise, students may lose confidence in themselves and become less motivated. Since busy, part-time adult students are juggling many things with their studies, my feedback must be specific and instructive, with references to possible errors of thought patterns and clear remedial direction, referring to textbook page numbers, online Web page helps, or other sources to get the students back on track or clarify their question. In some situations where an exchange of emails leaves a student still confused, I use the phone or live Web-conferencing for personal tutoring – virtual office hours, of a sort. This is becoming more and more popular with certain types of students.

*Structure.* When thinking through how to close the distance education gap through course structure, it was necessary to consider how every process and all content used in the classroom should best be done in a distance format. It was also necessary to think about materials that needed to be prepared for distance teaching that were not used in the classroom. Consequently, there is Web information about how the online course works, a brief introduction to language learning in general, a brief description of how Greek or Hebrew noticeably differs from English, how studying online differs from the classroom, a step-by-step study guide for the course, and even a fifteen and twenty-five week schedule to help students pace themselves.

For all assignments there are answer keys. The courses are supplemented with Ted Hildebrandt’s *Greek Tutor* or *Hebrew Tutor* CD programs to help provide the aural element of the language. And the course outline is coordinated with these CD’s to show students exactly what part of the CD will reinforce what part of the lesson.

Redundancy is another key element of course structure. Using the course texts, online lectures, Web notes, supplemental CDs, charts, interactive drills, reviews, and practice exams, the student is exposed to the material multiple times before finally taking a quiz or exam. This helps the student know what to expect when he or she is tested. This also enhances student motivation, since expectations for success are also a key factor in sustaining motivation (Pintrich and Schunk 1996).

Flexibility is important for part-time, non-traditional adult students. RTS Virtual online language students may enroll at any time – any week or month of the year. They have up to six months to complete a one-semester, three credit-hour language course. This is done both to allow them ample time to rearrange their schedules, and to allow for a more extended period of time for students to internalize the language. Even so, some students finish in only a few months. Thus it is clear that students are in control of the pace of their learning, making the most of their self-direction and their need to handle multiple roles in life. And feeling in control of one's learning is another important factor in motivation (Bandura 1986).

RTS Virtual's online language courses also allow great flexibility in due dates for assignments, and the overall pace at which students move through the course. With no regular meeting times with the instructor or other students, students set their own schedules and move through the material at their own pace. Students are merely required to take all quizzes or exams by the end of the course period.

Finally, the courses are designed to set the students up for success. Students are provided with estimates of how many hours a week they may need to commit, a synthesis of all learning materials into a step-by-step walk-through of what to do in the course, and study guides for quizzes and exams.

### *Techniques of Teaching and Learning*

*Learners must learn differently.* RTS Virtual language students sign up for their course by phone or email. They then must order all course materials as listed online, from either our bookstore or a source of their choosing. Once registered, they receive an email from the instructor that gives them the main URL. Upon receipt of this, they must install the attached font(s), in addition to the CD(s) that are part of the course. They are also instructed to explore links in the Website, so as to familiarize themselves with all the online course resources. Students must set a timetable for themselves, develop a study plan (or follow the one suggested in the course), and read all assigned course materials. In addition, they are encouraged to do all related assignments (translation and parsing exercises, supplemental drills on CD, and RTS online drills). These are not graded, however; they are only there to guide the student through the learning process. It is up to the student to check their assignment answers, monitor their own progress, and seek help when they feel they need it.

To prepare for exams or quizzes, the students do online reviews and practice exams. They then find a proctor for their exam, order their exams online, and

take their proctored exam. After their exams or quizzes are graded, the instructor emails them their grade, relevant comments on what they missed, and suggests any remedial action deemed necessary. The students then have the choice to respond to the instructor's communication on what they missed, and ask for any clarification. Again, they are free to do this whenever they wish, at whatever pace they wish, so long as they finish all assignments within six months.

Thus one can see that RTS Virtual language students must be more responsible for their learning, and responsible for more of their learning. This is definitely a different learning scenario than many are used to, and certainly very different from learning in a traditional face-to-face class.

*Teachers must teach differently.* Since the role of the virtual instructor is more like a coach, as the RTS Virtual Greek and Hebrew instructor I seek to develop a different relationship with online, busy, part-time adult students than with younger, traditional, face-to-face students. The relationship is more of a peer-to-peer nature, one of a dialogue of equals. I may know more about Greek or Hebrew than they, but many of my online students are very experienced and very accomplished in their field. Some have distinguished themselves in a singular fashion in their professions. More than a few of my students hold master's degrees; a few even hold doctorates in their field. They are not novices at life or at learning. They merely need me to coach them through negotiating the pitfalls of online Greek or Hebrew. Early on I establish a first-name relationship with my students. I invite them to point out any obvious or suspected typos in my material, as well as anything in my material that is not clear to them. Some of them comply, and I have improved some of my materials based on their suggestions. I view my distinguished students as my own guides in a way, to help me better understand my diverse student body and to broaden my teaching skills to cover a wider range of learning styles.

*Institutions must interact differently.* RTS Virtual has a Student Services Office that is totally dedicated to staying in close and frequent contact with the students (by email or phone) – giving them feedback on grades, course questions, or sometimes just offering encouragement and assurance that successful completion of the course is within their grasp. RTS Virtual Student Services even offers suggestions on how to study effectively, how to set a realistic schedule, and how to maximize one's time and efforts for the best results. Students are both called and emailed on a regular basis just to check in and see if there is anything the staff might be able to help them with. Also, RTS Virtual has one key individual who is available five days a week to field questions, encourage, and – more importantly – provide

assurance that the students are considered important: they are not just a number.

**“Success” Defined**

Before describing some possible reasons behind RTS Virtual’s success at the online biblical languages, a description of what I mean by “success” is in order.

Kirkpatrick (1994) developed a model for evaluating training in the business world, which has been embraced by education. He proposes that there are four levels of evaluation for training. The first, most basic level of evaluation according to Kirkpatrick is *learner reaction*, that is, did the students like the course? This deals with such issues as course content, delivery, materials – as well as student opinions of the instructor and whether the course held their interest. Educators and students alike will recognize this as the typical evaluation form given to students at the end of a course. Kirkpatrick’s second level is *learning/achievement*, that is, did they learn what we wanted them to learn? This level consists of course grades, as well as both student and professor perceptions about whether or not the students learned the stated goals and objectives of the course. Kirkpatrick’s third level is *use/performance* – do they use what we taught them on a regular basis? It addresses whether or not the skills learned are actually employed by the students in their regular tasks. The final level of Kirkpatrick’s model is *impact on the organization* that is, has this training improved productivity?

In the fall of 2004 I employed Kirkpatrick’s model to evaluate RTS Virtual’s online Greek program. I constructed an online, Likert-type survey that measured levels one through three of his evaluation model and sent it to seventy-seven former RTS Virtual online Greek students. Students had been out of their online Greek course for between six and twenty-four months. The response rate was 64 percent, with a final N of 49. Table 1 represents a summary of the results:

Sample items and mean scores from the survey are given in Table 2 below:

In addition to the survey, I conducted seven follow-up semi-structured phone interviews with survey respondents, to elicit more rich descriptions of their perceptions of their online course. I asked for specific examples

**Table 1:** Evaluation Survey Results, N = 49 (1 = not true at all; 5 = very true)

Level	Mean response
I ( <i>learner satisfaction</i> )	4.34
II ( <i>learner achievement</i> )	4.41
III ( <i>usage / performance</i> )	3.84

of how the students used Greek on a regular basis. Seminary students reported using it regularly to follow their professor in class when he or she described key elements of their lecture using the original language. Several students also reported using their Greek to write course papers. This confirmed the findings of the questionnaire. When asked how they used their Greek in their ministry or life, a pastor said it helped him answer questions from his parishioners. Another student said it helped her better understand how the English translations could differ so much on a given verse. One former RTS Virtual online Greek student said that the course opened up for him “the whole world of scholarly literature.” Other examples of responses on how students used their Greek included getting excited upon seeing something in the Greek text and telling a friend, following along in their Greek New Testament in public worship, and looking up in Greek passages that seem puzzling in English. This input from the interviews helped to confirm the questionnaire data on student satisfaction with and usefulness of the language courses.

One thing I was keen to learn was how well prepared for exegesis or reading RTS Virtual Greek students perceived themselves to be, compared with others. Responses ranged from “I was better prepared than some, not as well as some” to “I felt better prepared than the others.” The only drawback several students reported was that the other students who took Greek II from the same professor who taught their exegesis or reading course knew more about how the professor approached a text and knew better what he wanted from the students. And while I did not interview any of the twenty or so students I have had visiting from other seminaries, I know that several of them have communicated with me that they satisfactorily moved on to the next level of Greek or Hebrew at their respective schools.

**Table 2:** Sample Items and Mean Scores, N = 49 (1 = not true at all; 5 = very true)

Level	Item	Mean response
I	<i>Course helped me realize Greek is important</i>	4.20
	<i>Course increased my motivation or interest in Greek</i>	4.22
II	<i>Course was worth the time and effort</i>	4.33
	<i>Course met its stated goal (Read a narrative with a lexicon and minimal grammatical/syntactic aid)</i>	4.41
III	<i>Student reports regularly using Greek in . . .</i>	4.14
	<i>ministry or other personal interaction</i>	3.94
	<i>seminary courses when not required</i>	3.27
	<i>public or private Scripture reading sermon or Bible Study preparation</i>	3.82
	<i>the reading of commentaries</i>	4.31

Finally, I talked in person or on the phone with the RTS professors who teach Greek exegesis and readings. I asked them how my online students compared to other students in their classes. One professor reported that RTS Virtual online Greek students had a “good foundation in the basics of Greek grammar and syntax.” Another said there was “no discernable difference between the skill level of RTS Virtual Greek students and others.” Indeed, when I asked one professor how my students fared alongside his, he said he could not tell which ones were Virtual Greek students. The consensus of RTS residential professors was that our online Greek students were at a similar skill level as those who took Greek in the classroom. And while I did not include Virtual Hebrew students in the 2004 evaluation, former online Hebrew students, as well as RTS Hebrew exegesis and readings professors, report similar skill levels for online Hebrew students who have moved on to the next level. In addition, residential Greek and Hebrew professors often refer on campus students to the RTS online language courses when they have a scheduling conflict.

Given the results of this fairly extensive evaluation of RTS Virtual Greek, and the ongoing feedback I get from both Virtual Greek and Hebrew students and RTS professors, it is fair to say that the RTS Virtual online language program has been a success. Students are learning what we want them to learn, using it regularly, and performing satisfactorily in further seminary Greek and Hebrew courses.

### **Practice Grounded in Theory: Keys to Our Success**

RTS Virtual’s online Greek and Hebrew courses have been successful well beyond the expectations of the course designers and instructor. There are many variables involved in this success, to be sure. But it is reasonable to assume that the grounding of our practice in the theories of adult education, instructional design, distance education, and learner-centered instruction are among the significant variables contributing to RTS Virtual’s success with the online language program. Houle’s four components of education again help frame our discussion.

#### *1. Understanding Our Target Audience (Nature of the Learner)*

Knowing that our students average over forty years of age and work at least part time was crucial. RTS Virtual online language courses recognize that part-time adult students live a very different lifestyle from the traditional full-time classroom student. In an attempt to minimize the part-time adult “struggle to juggle,” our courses allow students flexibility about when to enroll and at what pace to proceed. This permits students to set

their own schedules and move through the material at their own pace, resulting in their having more control over their learning and taking more responsibility for their learning. Moreover, the life experiences that adults bring to study, and the fact that they finance much of their own education, makes adults ready and motivated (both intrinsically and extrinsically) to learn practical skills for the present and future. These characteristics make most adults good candidates for distance education. And it is for such students that we built our online language courses, and the adult learning literature provided a solid foundation for understanding our students.

It is likely that our emphasis on developing a different relationship – more of a learning coach – with more mature students has contributed to the success of RTS Virtual’s online language courses. Adult education and motivation theory suggests that this kind of relationship is productive and facilitative when working with older, more experienced learners who are looking for someone to coach them through their studies.

#### *2. Understanding Instructional Design (Goals Sought)*

RTS Virtual used solid instructional design principles, based on specific, measurable goals and objectives. Thus we were able to assess our students, as well as to plan, design, deliver, and evaluate our online biblical language program.

#### *3. Understanding Distance Education (the Milieu)*

RTS Virtual online language courses recognize the pedagogical gap created by the learner’s and the teacher’s being in a different place and time during the course. Consequently, the online language instructor and RTS staff undertake a coordinated, intentional, systematic effort to attempt to close or minimize this gap through the way we interact with our distance language students (dialogue) and the way we design, deliver, and manage the language courses (course structure). RTS Virtual online language courses also recognize that this gap dictates that distance learners must learn differently, distance teachers teach differently, and distance institutions must interact differently with their students.

#### *4. Understanding Learner-Centered Instruction*

RTS Virtual’s taking a “Learning Paradigm” approach (i.e., a student-centered approach) meant that the instructor’s role was one of creator of optimal learning environments, instead of imparter of knowledge. In such an approach, the learner is central, not the instructor or the institution. Our role is to facilitate student learning, and thus we design and deliver courses centered on student needs and desires, not on faculty or institutional ones.

## Epilogue

One question that naturally comes to mind after such a discussion concerns the level of faculty time commitment needed to teach these types of courses. I am in my eleventh year teaching Greek and Hebrew at the seminary level. I have taught both in the classroom and online. As the RTS Virtual online Greek and Hebrew instructor, I average about seventy-five students (Greek I-II and Hebrew I-II) at any one time, year around. So I roughly teach four courses – averaging eighteen students each – every fall, winter, spring, and summer. On average, I spend twenty-two to twenty-six hours per week teaching these courses. This involves (1) grading student quizzes and exams; (2) emailing students detailed feedback on what they missed, with references to where they can review what they missed; (3) answering student emails; and (4) sending regular, once-every-three-weeks emails where I check in on their progress, remind them of their due date, and remind them that I am here to help. Interspersed throughout any two-week span along the way will be a phone call or live Web conference or two where I go over with a student what he or she missed on an exam.

Compare this to teaching in the classroom: (1) three hours of classroom time, per three-credit hour course; (2) one to one-and-a-half hours of prep time; and (3) one to one-and-a-half hours per week grading quizzes or exams. This averages out to six hours per week, per three-credit hour course. Add to this a couple of hours per week of office hours. If I were to teach these four courses in the classroom during a regular semester, I would expect to spend about twenty-five to thirty hours per week – around the same amount of time I spend now.

The significant time difference comes in putting a Web-based course together. This takes considerably more time than putting together a traditional classroom course – as well as requiring that someone have at least some basic Web authoring skills. It is necessary to think through every process and all content used when teaching in the classroom and consider how these should best be delivered in a distance format – as well as thinking through materials that need to be prepared for distance teaching that are not used in the classroom. Since technology is the medium of instruction, all involved in course preparation, instruction, and assessment need varying levels of technical skill. This can be done with a team – where one has Web skills, another instructional design skills, and another serves as the content expert. Under typical conditions, given that those on the team have other responsibilities beyond developing any given course, one should plan on at least two to three months of lead time to put together a well-designed, effective, tested, and proof-read Web-based course.

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