

How Videoconferencing with International Scholars Can Enliven Your Classroom

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“So,” asked the students of Prof. Revelation Velunta, “Why do you want to speak with us? Why do you want to know about the study of the Bible in the Philippines?” The students were addressing us from Manila, where it was midnight their time. By means of videoconferencing—namely using Skype [Sky-Peer-to-Peer technology]), students from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas who were taking an introductory class had just had an opportunity to learn about “Decolonizing the Bible” from Revelation Velunta, Professor of New Testament and Cultural Studies at Union Theological Seminary (Philippines) in real time.¹ Prof. Velunta spoke with the students about the Philippines and its colonial past and how the experience of colonialism affects one's experience of reading the Bible. My students who had become accustomed to taking into consideration the historical context of ancient texts were thinking further about the context of the reader of these texts. Professor Velunta helped my students think about how biblical texts are read in different communities and to realize more clearly their own social location. Needless to say, the experience was an important one for my students and for me.

Why should a biblical scholar and her students in the United States speak with a scholar in the Philippines? Why should an educator communicate with scholars in other countries about one's discipline? Why share such interchanges with students? I can offer many good reasons. My university, although located in an urban and culturally diverse region, is interested in deepening the global awareness of our students. While we encourage study abroad and host a number of notable programs for students (such as in Angers, France and Edinburgh, Scotland), faculty are also thinking about how we can further internationalize our students' education even on campus. Further, I have been working to make the classroom interactive and dynamic and have sought ways to share with students and to make concrete the various methodologies and approaches to reading the Bible and the nature of scholarly exchange. By speaking with a biblical scholar from the Philippines, my students have the opportunity to learn new perspectives and to experience the diversity and dynamism of the academy. These lofty goals I have been able to realize, in part, by

¹ I would like to thank Revelation Velunta and the students of Union Theological Seminary (Dasmarinas, Cavite, Philippines), Milton Acosta, and Christo Lombaard for their generosity in sharing their time and expertise with students at St. Edward's University. I would also like to express my appreciation for Eric Trimble, Faculty Resource Center Manager of St. Edward's University, who facilitated these video-conference sessions, and for Leigh Andersen, Managing Editor of Publications, Society of Biblical Literature, for reading a draft of this essay and offering helpful suggestions.

inviting Prof. Velunta to speak with my students. The most important rewards are at the interpersonal level. My horizons and those of my students have been expanded. Prof. Velunta challenged us to read biblical literature differently and while we realized through the exchange our differences, we also were reminded of how these differences enrich our world. Further, through humor as well as frank discussion of difficult texts and through Prof. Velunta's encouraging us to reflect on our own gifts, we were reminded of our common humanity and about what we share.

Our visit with Professor Velunta of about one hour was transformative for us, recalling in many respects the experience of travel abroad. I have always been convinced that international experiences are essential to our development. From study of languages to cultures, biblical scholars are well poised to grasp the importance of awareness of other contexts and peoples. I have been enriched and challenged through such experiences and have certainly grown as a result. The opportunities to learn from and study with excellent scholars outside of one's home country, to conduct research abroad and to participate in symposia and conferences (such as the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting) that bring together scholars from around the world are truly gifts that assist us in our intellectual development and scholarship. The Society of Biblical Literature also recognizes the value in international exchanges.

“The SBL launched the International Cooperation Initiative (ICI) to foster biblical scholarship and to facilitate mutual cooperation among colleagues.” (Description of “the International Cooperation Initiative” (ICI), <http://www.sbl-site.org/InternationalCoopInitiative.aspx>).

“In accordance with the recommendations of the International Cooperation Initiative (ICI), SBL is establishing a set of lists that will facilitate faculty cooperation, including exchange and co-supervision among scholars and institutions in different parts of the world.” (the “ICI Teaching Collaboration Program”; <http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/ICITeaching.aspx>).

The International Cooperation Initiative (hereafter, ICI) and its various projects that facilitate biblical scholarship and teaching globally are, for me, welcome additions to the Society of Biblical Literature. In addition to being able to pledge financial support for the ICI Program, I was delighted to have the opportunity to demonstrate my interest in academic exchange by being listed on the ICI Scholar List. The “Scholar List” assists international cooperation by providing a database of biblical scholars who are interested in supervising or mentoring students from other countries, teaching abroad or hosting faculty from abroad, or teaching via electronic media. While I look forward to participating further in the various kinds of scholarly exchange facilitated by the ICI program, I can share how the Scholar List has been helpful to my students and me thus far.

I consulted the list this last year as I sought out colleagues to serve as guest speakers by means of videoconferencing for some of my classes. Three biblical scholars from outside of North America who are participants in the ICI program and willing to teach via electronic media were

especially important in providing my students with an international perspective and, I think, expanding my students' horizons vis-à-vis the Bible. Thanks to the ICI program and videoconferencing, my students were able to meet and learn from Milton Acosta, Professor of Bible and Theology at the Fundación Universitaria Seminario Biblico in Medellin, Colombia, Christo Lombaard, Professor of Christian Spirituality of the University of South Africa in Pretoria, and Prof. Velunta whose presentation I described above. Students at St. Edward's University benefited from the presentations of Profs. Acosta, Lombaard, and Velunta, as each commands different areas of expertise within biblical studies. At the same time, these biblical scholars are masterful teachers who also brought new vistas to my students and their encounter with the Bible.

How so? A number of my students remarked that Skype was especially valuable in providing them with a global perspective on the study of the Bible. For example, I asked students what they know about the Bible as a result of our visits with scholars from other countries that they would not know otherwise; one student responded: "(the guest lectures) helped me to grasp the fact that the Hebrew Bible is interpreted differently throughout the world and (that) living conditions and past experiences play a huge role in the interpretation of the Bible." When asked about his experience speaking with our class, Prof. Velunta shared: "Opportunities to meet and interact with people from different and diverse contexts and cultures make education exciting and challenging." My students and I wholeheartedly agree.

While the use of technology in the classroom may not always be without difficulties and while bringing scholars to my campus or having students and me travel to theirs would be especially desirable, with limited resources in the way of time and money, videoconferencing offers another alternative for international cooperation and scholarly exchange in the classroom. As Prof. Lombaard describes:

The chance to share one's insights with students who are oceans and continents away is something very special. Usually this dynamic is limited to one's own students, and a few colleagues at conferences. In the past, it was only with substantial commitments in travel and time that lecturers had the privilege of sharing their newly developing ideas with students in other contexts. Now, via technology, and facilitated by the SBL's ICI program, this has become much easier. Although there is no match for the full dynamic of being present in person in a class, technologically mediated classes are by no means an alternative to be ignored.

I will always encourage my students to travel and study abroad; likewise, I will seek to visit peers in their countries and find ways to facilitate their travel and mine so that we can work together and continue to learn from one another. Additionally, I am grateful that technology would allow us to share with our guild, communities, and students the knowledge and wisdom of colleagues in distant lands. When funding or the means of travel is not available, videoconferencing—particularly Skype, which is available for free—can still provide students with a virtual window of the world. Prof. Velunta similarly notes:

Technology allows people to cross borders that most would not be able to cross. (Video-conferencing) provides us the next best thing to face-to-face encounters. Moreover, I remember Sean Connery sharing that, being very, very poor, he got the greatest gift he's ever received when he was five years old. He learned to read. For many today, especially in my part of the world, Skyping provides a similar gift.

Thus, if you are interested in teaching with electronic media, participating in scholarly exchange, and would like to further interact with colleagues from around the world, be sure to visit the "Scholar List" and learn more about SBL's International Cooperation Initiative.

Prof. Lombaard shared with me: "My experience teaching Professor Coblenz-Bautch's class at St. Edward's University was as positive for me as it seems to have been for her students. Had it not been for the ICI program, this would never have happened." Thank you, Society of Biblical Literature, and members of the ICI Executive Board; you are indeed facilitating mutual cooperation among colleagues and are internationalizing our professional society in many positive ways.