



# Relational Discipleship in Online Learning

Pam Horneck

Discipleship is relational. A common concern among both teachers and parents new to online education is that students will miss a critical part of the learning process: personal connection. In reality, the online teacher has far more personal connections than one might think. Granted, the online teacher rarely attends the ballgames or recitals or sees students at the mall, but what seems to be a challenge can actually have advantages. The online relationship between a teacher and student has unique dynamics. Sharing with the teacher online can be less intimidating than

meeting face-to-face. Quiet students are often more eager to type than talk. **An online teacher's ministry is not at a single location but can literally span the globe.** At NorthStar Academy, personal connections happen every day.

Spiritual formation and discipleship at NSA first must meet both NICS and NSA's mission statements and the Expected Student Outcomes. These state that students should

be reached for Christ. NSA's commitment to Christ will lead teachers to invest in students, inspiring and motivating them spiritually and academically. Curriculum will lead

students to develop a biblical lifestyle of excellence. When NSA is successful, students are Christ-followers who, through discipleship and biblically integrated courses, develop a lifestyle based on biblical principles that demonstrate true worship in all areas of life. Students will come away with a God-centered, rather than self-centered, lifestyle.

The key, though, is not simply having documents that sound good; they must be the fabric from which the school is woven. From the part-time teacher with three students to the administrative team, the school's mission must be the impetus behind all decisions. The goals of reaching the world for Christ, investing in student lives, and shaping God-centered students determines which teachers are hired, what curriculum is used, how teachers communicate, how discipline is handled, and all other aspects of the school.

Hiring protocol begins the discipleship focus. A three-step process includes an application and screening to ensure a shared worldview. In the informal interview, the applicant hears the mission, heart, and vision of the school, and only then does he progress to a formal interview. If discipleship is less important to a prospective teacher than curriculum, NSA is not the right fit.

Discipleship of students happens best when it is part of the school culture. Administration models discipleship to faculty,



and faculty then disciples students. Prayer groups and mentoring are present at all levels. Teachers know administrators and their lead teachers are there to counsel and pray with them. New teachers are guided by mentor teachers and lead teachers. **When an atmosphere of discipleship and prayer starts at the administrative level, it naturally flows to teachers and students.**

Teachers are held accountable to have interactions with online students. Knowing that spiritual mentoring will not happen unless a relationship exists, teachers are expected to contact students before courses begin, contact each student regularly, and Skype with students every semester. While teachers are eager for Skype conversations, students might find this intimidating. This requirement allows students to see their teachers in natural surroundings, often at home with their family and pets. From this, teachers gain a greater opportunity to minister to students. Teachers also keep in touch with parents through e-mail and Skype, further building trust and friendship and providing yet another opportunity to disciple.

The online classroom can help students learn to think for themselves as a biblical worldview is woven through all subjects and taught in required worldview courses. Traditional classrooms often have those few students who engage in discussions while others quietly sit by or merely parrot what they heard on the test. Dr. Bill Carroll, NSA's lead teacher in the Worldview and Bible department, says, **"Distance learning forces students to think for themselves—to wrestle with new ideas and concepts, and formulate their own acceptance or rejection of beliefs.** Thus, the lack of a face-to-face setting actually creates a situation that makes students do their own work. And personal engagement in one's framework of worldview is crucial to making doctrine personalized. There is ownership in the struggle of faith."

Discussion forums within courses are another key place for biblical formation and discipleship. Students think through and discuss what they believe in the confines of a classroom with a godly teacher nearby. This is a safe environment for students to disciple one another and come to a strong understanding of what they believe. NorthStar has open enrollment, and therefore has students from a variety of Christian and non-Christian backgrounds. Christian students will soon be on their own in colleges and need to solidify what they believe in light of opposing views. An online classroom with a godly teacher, parents who can observe the discussion, and other Christian students provides a prime environment for online students to learn to stand for their beliefs.

When the right teachers are hired into an atmosphere of discipleship, God uses them to disciple people around the



world. A striking example of this is the story of a Syrian refugee who is an NSA student. A teacher has spent hours discipling this Muslim girl, who would never be able to attend a Christian school unless it was online. Every Sunday morning, she and her family 'attend' church via Skype with this teacher, who is also a pastor's wife.

This Syrian girl 'sits' on the front row of the church, and several churchgoers stop to say "Hi" on the way to their seats. She listens to the songs and the preaching from her refugee camp on the other side of the world. This fuels further discussions and opportunities to share. When this girl's computer broke, the teacher sent a replacement to her across the world.

In another instance, a student's family was ministering in a dangerous area of the world; the father was supposed to be arrested upon re-entrance into their ministry country. An NSA teacher prayed with the mother on Skype as she was at the airport leaving the U.S., headed to the country where she thought her family would soon be separated. Another NSA teacher spends hours discipling students through discussion boards and answering questions that students would not normally ask in a classroom situation; he has seen over 40 students commit to Christ in the 15/16 school year. Many students report his class is their favorite.



A spirit of discipleship must be integrated throughout the school, from administrators to teachers to office and support staff. Every phone call, e-mail, and Skype must reflect a pervasive focus on the school's mission of reaching the world for Christ through Christian education. When that mission is modeled, taught, and assessed, it becomes part of the school's DNA, leading to a healthy, disciple-making community.

Editor's Note: ACSI now accredits online Christian schools and the online programs of traditional Christian schools. The first online schools accredited by ACSI are Heritage Christian Online School, NorthStar Academy, and Liberty University Online Academy.

According to Eric Vane of Heritage Christian Online School, "So far the fruit of this program has been delicious, as we have witnessed the emergence of wise young prophets, detectives, and archaeologists who can recognize the difference between false promises and our enduring hope."

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