Letter on Technology and Theology Dept…

Dear Theology Department,                                                                5/9/2016

I would like to come together to have a free exchange of ideas regarding the Chromebook roll out, technology as a whole and the ongoing effort that we are all engaged in-to be better theology teachers. I know that I have benefited immensely from observing you in your classes and on retreats and just in how you interact with students. I feel strongly that we can come together and support each other through the impending turbulence of adopting the 1 to 1 Chromebooks. I am optimistic when it comes to the changes happening at Damien. I truly have confidence in the leadership of the school.  I think pessimism is different than caution and critical analysis. What I have tried to do is be realistic and careful in my role as a navigator. I really believe these are exciting times and that we as a department have an opportunity to emerge as a team, ready to achieve our collective end- to put our students in touch with Christ and to guide them into a profound appreciation for the goodness, beauty and truth of the Catholic Faith.

When we come together I would like to hear your opinions on the following…

        Is it true that technology is a tool not an end?

        Is there a danger in losing a personal approach?

        What do you think about flipping?

        Is there a need to teach kids how to use the Internet?

        Do you foresee any possibility of leading our students into online evangelism?

        How do you flesh out the framework? The ‘Arm’ analogy as a thought experiment?

        How can we take advantage of open sources and primary sources?

        What role should the Catholic Intellectual Tradition play in our curriculum?

        Can we use the online access exploring ‘great’ Catholic treasures?

        Do you agree with the proposed guidelines for Using Chromebooks in Theology Classes?

In all sincerity, my friends, I value your ideas and opinions. What follows are my answers to those questions above…I have placed my trust in you by sharing my thoughts openly and I have exposed my own weaknesses both in my thinking and in how I express my thoughts. Please , for now, keep this conversation among our department.

I didn’t realize how much I had to say about the things that are going on until I ended up writing nearly fifteen pages! I apologize for the wordiness. Believe it or not, I really tried to follow E.B. White’s advice to writers, ‘Omit unnecessary words”.

A fellow worker in His Vineyard,

Gary S.

**Technology is a ‘Tool’ not an End**

What is our ‘End’ or purpose as a Catholic high school as opposed to just any high school?

Catholic educational institutions should have three goals in order to be able to fulfil their primary mission to allow students to “encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth” (Pope Benedict XVI). These objectives are:

         To provide an environment in which students are enabled to build and deepen their relationship with God;

         To foster an academic culture aimed at the pursuit of truth;

         To actively promote growth in virtue.

Whatever our backgrounds, whatever our education, whatever our childhood experience may have been, whatever our personal beliefs may be, we are in fact Catholic high school teachers. In light of this, we should all take our Catholic identity seriously. It is why we exist as an institution. We all chose to teach for a Catholic School so that is just a matter of truth in advertising. Supporting and participating in our Catholic identity is a responsibility or an opportunity (depending on how you look at it) that we all share.

If our Catholic identity is not just a thing we have to do to appease the Diocese or a minority of parents that really care about Catholic formation, then our educational end, as stated above, should be acknowledged and accepted by all.

Technology is a tool. It, in itself, will not make your students learn. When left alone it may even be an obstacle for true learning. The goal of understanding and change can only be reached through technology if there is a structural, guided process that integrates technology as a tool to achieving the end.  I think we have a tendency to get caught up in an over-emotional and naively optimistic expectation of 1 to 1 technology in education. I think we have to be careful not to have an overblown expectation of the value of making this move. Yes. It will be a step in the right direction. Yes the students will benefit in the long term. But let’s not glamorize, or romanticize the presumptive outcomes. Technology will not make poor teachers good. It may make them worse. The reality is that there will be a whole new set of problems including discipline issues. Having said that, healthy enthusiasm and excitement should be welcomed.

**Technology and ‘Discarnation’: Emphasizing a Personal Approach**

More and more campus ministry programs are offering retreats with the theme of being ‘unplugged’. The presumption is that teens today are plugged in too much. There is an over-load of imagery, noise, tweets and other media. When I see students with earbuds hanging out of their shirts I think of an increase of news stories of ‘plugged in teen pedestrians being struck by drivers as they cross the street. Overall, we are dealing with distracted living. I observed with great bewilderment as two young people on a date at a local restaurant were literally more engaged with their phones than each other. What really struck me was the apparent normality and nonchalance of the couple as they ignored each other the whole time. This begs the question, do our students own their phones or do their phones and devices own them?

Alarmingly, there are many humanizing values and skills that we are in danger of losing as a culture. More and more it seems like we are losing things like, looking into someone’s eyes and having a conversation for an extended period of time, empathizing with a friend who needs a hug, telling jokes, sharing personal stories, writing meaningful letters to loved ones and sitting down for a meal with the family.

Having worked many retreats, I know that many students give way too much time to devices rather than real people. I know that many of our students have online addictions with fantasies: both in gaming and porn. There exists an imbalance in many of their lives with fantasy competing with and beating out reality.

More than ever, meaningful human interaction should be offered by their teachers and classmates. The hallmarks of the Catholic approach to educational methodology are that it be personal, incarnational and sacramental. Actually, this is what Christianity is all about. Jesus is the Word who became flesh. God became a man and dwelt among us, so that he could have a relationship with each person in a personal, human way for our own sake. He called people by name. He knew them and their families. He ate, spoke, laughed and cried with them. In the story of the Bible, God went from distant, invisible and veiled to visible, touchable and personally engaged. This the great movement of ‘Incarnation’ over the course of salvation history. In so far as technology has the ability to connect us with others and to facilitate interaction with many people, it also has the reverse effect of ‘discarnation’ (dis-embodiment).  Patrick S. J. Carmack, J.D. is the President of the [Ignatius-Angelicum Liberal Studies Program](http://www.ignatius.com/promotions/liberal-studies-program/), and the founder of the [Angelicum Academy Homeschool Program](http://angelicum.net/" \t "_blank) and of the [Great Books Academy Homeschool Program](http://angelicum.net/great-books-program/) (2000 AD). He offers online, distance learning for high school students and college students for college credit in the area of Humanities. In a 2014 interview with Catholic World Report, regarding discarnation and technology Carmack said,

 “There are both advantages and disadvantages to this, but overall the changes are troubling, especially if one connects them to the increasing secularization of the West, where technological change is most rapid. In a word, there is a dehumanizing element to technology that disembodies us to some degree—a discarnation of a sort. That, of course, runs counter to the Catholic love of all reality, including the body and the incarnational aspect of the faith.”  (<http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3311/the_present_future_and_quality_of_catholic_online_education.aspx>)

This statement really hits home for me. I received a graduate degree from a distance learning program at Franciscan University. The flexibility and the excellent curriculum are what I valued in distance learning. However, my experience of discarnation was real. I yearned for a real human teacher to engage me in a discussion. That discussion was limited to writing papers and taking tests with a proctor and then submitting them through the mail.  It wasn’t until the end of the program when I was required to attend a six week session on campus that I truly received an authentic Catholic experience of education. Not only did I have a relationship with my teacher, I also became friends with classmates and truly experienced Christ through them in a way that distance learning could not accomplish. Going back to the ‘end’ of Catholic education as a as ‘an encounter with Christ’, I can say from experience that it can only happen with personal engagement with those who bear His message. That forty day on-campus requirement changed my life and made me passionate about incarnational, sacramental and personal interaction with my students. Though I use it effectively as a tool, technology can sometimes get in the way of that. Worse, it could be thought of as a replacement of that.

**Teaching Internet Use**

High school students, like any other section of the population are very hard to make generalizations about. They are not all the same. One-size doesn’t fit all. In my experience, the students are not as excited about technology as we think. It is a mistake to make sweeping generalizations about our students. Things like, ‘They all have phones, i-pads, lap-tops. They all use their phones in class even when they aren’t supposed to be. They all know how to use apps. They all prefer e-books. It has been my experience that this is all untrue. When given the option to use a device or a book the vast majority chose a book. I only have approximately 20% with devices that they use daily. Another assumption people make is that teens are very aware of the benefits and dangers of the internet. I don’t think they have enough life-experience to understand how to be safe and productive online.

*Safety:* Everyone in our classes will have internet access next year. I believe there is a need to teach students to navigate safely. There are bad people and good people. There are bad websites and good websites. Everyone knows that. The questions are whether some information can be considered reliable. Whether some content may be considered propaganda. Whether some content may be spiritually damaging or psychologically damaging/addicting. The Virtus program has many great resources and bulletins for online safety. The teacher should also monitor carefully all online activity. b

*Resources:* The Theology classes have so many great resources available to them online. There are also many second-rate or fringe Catholic resources just as easy to find. High School students would need guidance on what is reliable and what is not. They may not be able to discern why some resources are not Catholic even when they claim to be. When you’re sharing your teaching influence with the whole world the pursuit of truth may get derailed. Truth is not always easy to find online. Students should be taught how to check the CCC to verify whether the information conforms to Catholic teachings. Carefully selected Catholic websites can be listed and made available on our Edlio or Moodle class websites.

*Evangelization:*Every baptized member of the Church is called to spread the Gospel in both actions and words. There are so many examples of teens evangelizing teens online. Our students should be able to exercise this missionary mandate to the extent that they are formed in the Catholic Faith. We should encourage them to become knowledgeable enough and zealous enough to share their faith online. This would need to be taught. This is a very exciting development that the adoption of 1 to 1 Chromebooks will provide.

**Open Source and Primary Source**

In the Theology department we are concerned with meeting the standards set by the USCCB for textbooks and support material. The textbooks have to follow the guidelines of the ‘bishop’s curriculum’ and be approved by a committee before we can use them.

Any support material should also be in conformity with the CCC and faithful to Catholic teachings. At the very least, they should not be in direct opposition to the teachings of the Church as espoused in the CCC. The teachers have used their own discretion when it comes to support material. I’m not aware of any guidance from the ADLA or USCCB for Catholic theology teachers when it comes to ‘open source’ books in lieu of the approved textbooks.

Personally, I feel that the students can benefit more in the ‘open-source’ setting provided that the teacher has a serious, personal commitment to fidelity to the Magisterium and CCC. If 'open-source' were approved, teachers would have to be disciplined and motivated to adhere to the course outline. Even with a course outline and an approved textbook some teachers have, in the past, strayed from the program and have just ‘done their own thing’. In literature or social studies this may not be an issue but given the expectations that the Diocese, the parents and I as the department chair have it can be problematic.

There are free ‘open source’ books, blogs and websites that I use to build curriculum as support material. The Vatican Website has all church docs including the CCC. The  Catholic Education Resource Center (CERC), Catholic Answers, Bishop Barron’s ‘The Word on Fire’ are all very good examples of ‘open source ‘ that are faithfully, and  authentically Catholic. I came across 1478  e-books that are free here…<https://catholicebooks.wordpress.com/list-by-title/>      Biblical and Religious Art and Music here  <http://catholic-resources.org/Art/> .

Catholic Apps here…  <https://catholicapptitude.org/essential-catholic-apps/>.

By ‘Primary Source’ I am referring to type of excerpts found in the Catholic Spirit Anthology. The writings of the Saints, letters, diaries, auto-biographies and prayers could be thought of as primary sources. There are free e-books which are considered classics in the Catholic heritage. Also, the Magisterial documents, encyclicals, constitutions, exhortations etc.. Other primary sources could literary gems/excerpts to which the textbooks, as secondary sources, would make reference. In short, our classes could have a ‘Great Books’ component.

**CIT: Exploring ‘Great’ Catholic Treasures**

Guys like exploring... (think ‘Indiana Jones’). Who hasn’t dreamed of finding a dusty, torn treasure map and finding the gems and gold coins that it would lead to. (think ‘Goonies’). You are the keeper of the keys to a vast treasure. When it comes to introducing your students to all the amazing treasures that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has bequeathed to the whole world, you are the map. There are unlimited possibilities when it comes to introducing the Catholic treasure trove of great art, literature, music, architecture, biographies and actual treasure. In addition to this, there are some excellent guided tours of Catholic places such as the Vatican, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and biblical locations such as the Temple Mount, the Cathedral of Shroud of Turin, the Mount of Olives etc. How can we guide students into exploration of these places?

I know of and have used a couple websites that allow exploration of great paintings close up. Such as Closer to Van Eyck: Rediscovering The Ghent Altar Piece here… <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/>. And a guided tour of The Garden of Earthly Delights by Bosch here…

<https://churchpop.com/2016/04/23/interactive-site-reveals-catholic-painting/>

Chromebooks in class can make us all explorers and treasure hunters!

**The following is a proposal for a guideline for use of Chromebooks in Theology classes.**

        In the Theology department we are concerned with meeting the standards set by the USCCB for textbooks **and support material**. The textbooks have to follow the guidelines of the ‘bishop’s curriculum’ and be approved by a committee before we can use them. All support material online is left to the good judgment of the instructor.

        Any support material should also be in conformity with the CCC and faithful to Catholic teachings. At the very least, they should not be in direct opposition to the teachings of the Church as espoused in the CCC.

        The Chromebook should not take the place of the Bible. Whenever possible we would like Scripture reading or Scripture references to be done with an actual hard copy Bible.

        So called ‘open source’ online e-books should not get more attention than the approved textbooks/e-books.

        In-class internet searches should be carefully guided by the instructor. Any online material that is contrary to or offends the dignity of a Catholic Theology Class should be avoided.

        Students should be taught that sources online are not always an authoritative or authentic source of Church teachings even if they claim to be Catholic.

        Students should be introduced to and instructed how to avail themselves of good, reliable and authentically Catholic online learning resources.

        Students should use their Chromebook internet searches and or apps for the sake of achieving an educational purpose as spelled out in the curriculum map or lesson plan. The theology teacher is too busy teaching to give ‘Free Time’ or ‘free-use ‘ of their Chromebooks.

        Use of the Chromebooks should never be thought of as a replacement of the teacher when it comes to the primary source of information about the Catholic Faith.