

The Book of Mormon is filled with experiences applicable to religious educators relying on distance education methods.

The Book of Mormon: A Powerful Model for Distance Education

ADAM R. JARDINE

Adam R. Jardine (jardinear@ChurchofJesusChrist.org) is an instructor at the Tempe Arizona Institute of Religion.

=====

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many within the Church Educational System to participate in online delivery for classroom instruction. Success has varied, and many teachers have faced not only the difficulties of a new and possibly unfamiliar delivery method but also the challenge of becoming online course designers. The realities of COVID-19 forced educational systems, both secular and religious, to pivot their educational strategy, causing online delivery to become the primary educational delivery method in many areas. What many educators initially experienced during the pandemic was not regular online delivery, but rather “emergency remote teaching.”¹ Though the COVID-19 pandemic produced additional teaching challenges, valuable experiences of teachers and students can contribute to furthering online religious education.

Online learning has developed and expanded over the past decades and is among the latest forms of distance education.² Distance education is “teaching and learning that takes place where there is a physical and geographical separation between the teacher and the student.”³ Being separated from the teacher by time, location, or both requires students to rely on distance

methods. Much has been discussed by scholars about online learning as a distance education method, yet little to nothing has been published regarding the Book of Mormon as a model for distance education. The Book of Mormon and its coming forth are filled with experiences that parallel modern-day distance education. Consideration of these experiences and their implications may help religious educators recognize the value of distance education and better respond to the challenges of online delivery.

Distance education has been part of religious pedagogy for centuries. Communicating divine messages from a distance is not unfamiliar territory for the Lord nor many of his appointed servants. Apostolic letters from Paul and others are a form of religious education delivered through distance methods.⁴ The scriptures themselves are designed for distance learning as the authors are not present with readers. The Book of Mormon prophets Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni engraved upon plates with a latter-day audience in mind, knowing that they would not be present when many of their readers discovered their divine messages.⁵ Elder David A. Bednar often invites religious educators and others to discover divine messages and answers to personal questions by purchasing an inexpensive copy of the Book of Mormon and engaging in a topical study for answers.⁶ As a teacher, I responded to that challenge and sought to discover evidence of and experiences with distance education in the Book of Mormon that could further develop and enhance online religious education.

Distance Education Delivery

Distance education has various methods of delivery, yet if done effectively spiritual outcomes can be similar to traditional classrooms.⁷ Distance education happens through a mediating form of communication despite the teacher and student being separated by time or location. In the twenty-first century, computer-mediated communication is a primary form of distance learning. Though not physically present, online instructors deliver their material through mediated means by asynchronous, synchronous, or blended learning environments. Asynchronous online learning happens when teachers deliver educational material to their students and allowing access to the material at any time, without requiring real-time interaction. Today this may look like text or recorded video communication of lesson material through Canvas, Blackboard, or other learning management systems as the means of delivery. Synchronous online learning is when students and teachers are separated by

location yet use technology to interact in real-time. Synchronous methods like Zoom, Webex, FaceTime, or other means. A blended or hybrid method is a variation of in-person and online learning or courses that include both asynchronous and synchronous components.

Some feel that online learning requires a “community of inquiry” and that online courses are most effective when a sense of community is established through cognitive, social, and teaching presences.⁸ This means that learning experiences help individuals discover meaning through information processing, build human connection through projecting personal identity, and facilitate interaction with course content.⁹ Failure to have each prevents a deeper learning experience¹⁰ and can negatively impact the overall sense of community in online courses.¹¹

Spiritual learning adds what might be termed spiritual presence, where students not only have a connection with the material, other students, and their teacher but feel connected with the divine. Combining both secular and spiritual learning methods can assist to reach a higher or deeper level of understanding. Deep spiritual learning requires a process of knowing, doing, and becoming through the influence and guidance of the Holy Ghost.¹² A combination of both the community of inquiry and instruction by the Holy Ghost makes distance learning in religious education more than simply a secular pursuit of religious knowledge. Distance learning instructors have a powerful opportunity to further develop a community of inquiry in their courses and help facilitate experiences with the Holy Ghost.

God has used various methods of delivery for distance education. Figure 1 is a model of potential distance education methods used throughout the scriptures. The Book of Mormon demonstrates that God uses both asynchronous and synchronous forms of distance learning through various means of mediated communication. In each educational episode discussed, the teacher and student will be identified, the kind of distance separating them, the method or medium used to provide relevant educational experiences, and the pattern and implications that may assist distance educators today.

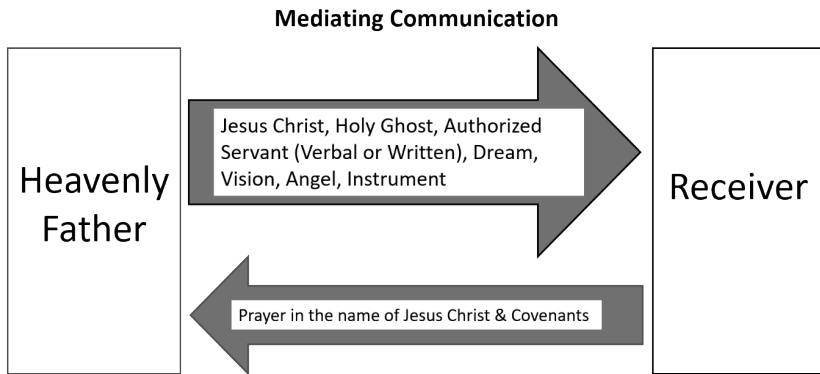


Figure 1. Methods of mediated communication between God and his children.

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

The process by which the Lord designed the Book of Mormon to come forward is itself an example of distance education. Joseph Smith recorded that on the night of 21 September 1823 he received a divine manifestation. Moroni appeared and declared that “he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and . . . that God had a work for me to do” (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). In Joseph Smith’s account there does not appear to be dialogue between Moroni and Joseph, showing that Moroni’s purpose was to deliver a message. If there was no dialogue between them, Moroni may be considered the mediating method of communication from God to Joseph. God and Joseph were separated by distance with an angel being the means of communication. It may be argued that this is a more traditional teaching experience with a physically present teacher. However, Joseph indicated another medium was used in this interaction when a “vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it” (Joseph Smith—History 1:42). This medium connected Joseph to a distant location at a different time (assuming the vision showed the hill in the daytime or a time when Joseph went there and could recognize it).

Joseph’s experience with the translation of the Book of Mormon is a model of distance education. God synchronously interacted with Joseph from a distance as he provided divine communication revealing the text of the Book of Mormon through the mediating method of both the interpreters and the seer stone.¹³ In speaking of the Book of Mormon, Nephi prophesied

that the translator would be asked by God to do an incredible work and that the book coming forth would be “a revelation from God” (2 Nephi 27:7). God also asynchronously addressed the translator through Nephi’s writing about the translation process when he said, “Wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee” (2 Nephi 27:20). This communication would be done at a distance through a mediating source designed to bring forth the Book of Mormon.

Both Moroni’s visit and the translation process have implications for distance education. God used both visual and text-based communication to deliver a message to Joseph. Both had a profound effect on him and were effective means of communicating the message. Joseph did not initially know how to translate using the Urim and Thummim provided by Moroni but learned and developed this capacity.¹⁴ In Oliver Cowdery’s attempts to translate, he stumbled under the assumption that translation would come naturally or without great effort (see Doctrine and Covenants 9:5–11). Similarly, teachers approaching distance education with the idea of ease might become frustrated with the difficulty of this delivery method. Online teaching and learning are inherently different from traditional classrooms. However, Lori Newbold, director of Training Services with Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, recently stated, “The Savior knows how to teach online.”¹⁵ Just as Joseph had to rely on the Savior to develop into a translator, teachers today must do the same to develop the skills and abilities to become effective online religious educators.

The Book of Mormon Itself Is Distance Education

The Lord inspired and intended the Book of Mormon to be used in the latter days as an instrument for distance education (see 2 Nephi 29:12). He inspired prophets throughout the Nephite and Lamanite civilizations to write to audiences who were separated by both time and location. Some wrote to their posterity, to all the house of Israel, and even all people on the earth (see 2 Nephi 33:13). These carefully crafted messages can lead readers to Jesus Christ. Moroni’s concluding message invited readers to engage in a pattern of distance learning where a personal testimony of the record’s truth would be given through the mediating method of the Holy Ghost (see Moroni 10:3–5).

President Ezra Taft Benson taught that some Book of Mormon authors saw the latter days and that readers should consider their messages with modern application in mind.¹⁶ Chad Webb, administrator of Seminaries and

Institutes of Religion, invited teachers to allow the authors of the Book of Mormon to communicate directly with students through the mediating form of their written text. He said:

If Nephi or the brother of Jared or Ruth were available, wouldn't we invite them to teach what they have learned about faith? If we wanted to help our students understand the blessing and beauty of repentance, and the Apostle Paul or Alma the Younger walked into the room, surely we would invite them to speak instead of asking them to sit quietly in the corner until we had finished our lesson. If we wanted our students to know how to endure trials faithfully, and Joseph Smith or Abraham or Job were in the room, wouldn't we gladly turn the time over to them? Ultimately, if the Savior were to come into our classroom, I am sure that each of us would want His words to be the message our students heard that day. The scriptures give us that opportunity every day if we will simply let them be at the center of our students' experience.¹⁷

Circumstances prevent the writers from physically entering the room, but through distance methods, their messages are available for students. Online religious educators can develop modules and plan gatherings that employ methods that increase the opportunity to learn at a distance from these inspired authors and in turn connect with heaven. Following the counsel given by President Benson and Chad Webb can help position their students to experience spiritual presence.

Distance Education Models from the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is filled with experiences applicable to religious educators relying on distance education methods. Many of the mediating forms of communication shown in figure 1 will be discussed using examples from the Book of Mormon. Each has important modern-day implications that may benefit religious education.

Distance Education from Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the great Mediator between Heavenly Father and his children. He is connected to and affiliated with each of the distance education methods in the Book of Mormon. However, the Book of Mormon has unique and notable experiences with the Savior delivering his message through distance means. Two of those experiences will be mentioned.

Great destruction happened among the people before Jesus visited the ancient American inhabitants. During three days of darkness and distress among the people, the Savior's voice was heard inviting them to repent (see

3 Nephi 9–10). Powerful messages filled with doctrine, warning, and invitations were expressed. This experience is unique because he was the mediating method of communication from Heavenly Father to his children and though unseen the message came directly from his audible voice.

The brother of Jared had multiple distance education experiences with the Savior. Of note is when the Savior audibly spoke to him separated by cloud cover (see Ether 2:4–5, 14). Teacher presence was experienced as the brother of Jared received direct instruction and increased understanding from the Savior. The brother of Jared's experience regarding the dilemma of light in barges required cognitive presence (see Ether 2:22–25). Faith-filled critical thinking efforts and possible reliance on previous scriptural or traditional examples¹⁸ facilitated even greater revelatory moments, even a personal manifestation of the Savior. The Lord relied on synchronous distance learning as well as blended learning methods to provide a sacred and rich learning experience for the brother of Jared. These experiences included principles of the community of inquiry and spiritual presence.

Online religious educators cannot produce the voice of Jesus Christ but may encourage students to “hear Him”¹⁹ as they study the Savior's words within scripture. Listening audibly to the text of the Savior's words through audiovisual materials or studying the direct words of Jesus Christ as written in the scriptures can enhance a learning experience. Experiencing teaching, cognitive, and social presence in online settings and blended learning environments can promote distance education benefits and enhance student outcomes.

Distance Education from the Holy Ghost

Individuals learning from God through the mediating method of the Holy Ghost may be considered the most common form of distance education in the Book of Mormon.²⁰ From a distance, God conveys heavenly messages to his children through this divine channel (see John 14:26). This may be fitting, because President Wilford Woodruff stated, “If you have the Holy Ghost with you. . . I can say unto you that there is no greater gift, there is no greater blessing, there is no greater testimony given to any [person] on earth.”²¹ Lehi prophesied that manifestations through this method were intended to be a primary means of spiritual development, especially among the Gentiles after the Savior's resurrection (see 1 Nephi 10:11). There are more references to

this form of communication in the Book of Mormon than can be discussed here, but a few relevant experiences will be shared.

Of note is Enos's experience with distance education from the Holy Ghost. He wrote that leading up to his pleading prayer, "the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, *sunk deep into my heart*" (Enos 1:3; emphasis added). After wrestling in mighty prayer, he stated that "there came a voice unto me" (Enos 1:5) that alleviated his burden and brought confirmation of forgiveness. He experienced a manifestation of what Elder D. Todd Christofferson called "the messenger of divine grace,"²² bringing relief from sin. When later praying for the Nephites, Enos explained that "the voice of the Lord came *into my mind again*" (Enos 1:10; emphasis added), confirming this was a distance experience.²³

Alma the Younger received divine communication about the Savior's atoning experience through the communication of the Holy Ghost (see Alma 7:8–12). He proclaimed that "the Spirit hath said this much unto me" (Alma 7:9) and then conveyed sublime detail regarding the Savior's birth and mission. God's communication with Alma, through the mediating influence of the Holy Ghost, provided information about the Savior's experience that is not expressed in other scripture.

Interestingly many distance learning experiences with the Holy Ghost appear to be initiated by the learner. Lehi prayed with all his heart (see 1 Nephi 1:5), which might be considered a catalyst for his spiritual manifestations. Nephi initiated some of his grand visions through pondering and seeking to see and know the vision of his father (see 1 Nephi 11:1). Alma silently prayed for relief from burdensome persecution (see Mosiah 24:12–15), and others approached God with questions and received answers through the Holy Ghost.²⁴ However, there is evidence that not all communication from God mediated by the Holy Ghost is initiated by the receiver.

Online learning can be an effective method through which students learn and initiate their own experiences with the Holy Ghost. Teachers can encourage students to put themselves in tune with the Spirit by preparing their hearts and minds for divine messages. In some cases, online delivery requires more participation from individual students. Teachers can establish their online classroom in a way that facilitates engagement and encourages participation. Discussions in online forums promote student's thinking and may allow time to process thoughts, feelings, and words more carefully before posting. Online discussion boards can be more democratic as they provide

everyone an equal opportunity to share their views, regardless of whether they may be more reserved and not as prone to share in a face-to-face setting. Promoting greater student engagement and responsibility may allow students greater opportunity to feel spiritual presence.

Distance Education from Authorized Servants

God commonly communicates through authorized servants and may use various methods to deliver divine communication. Speaking in public gatherings, ministering one-by-one, or sending written communication are among those methods. These servants may be separated from the intended audience when communicating God's message.

King Benjamin's address models a unique and powerful example of traditional, distance, and blended learning from authorized servants of God. When the population assembled, some participated in traditional education because they were either within the temple walls or close enough to see the king and hear his message (see Mosiah 2:5–7). Others required an asynchronous distance education approach because they were beyond his vocal reach and the king ministered to them by having his message written and distributed to the people (see Mosiah 2:8). The Book of Mormon makes no distinction regarding the impact of King Benjamin's message on those who heard his voice and those who read his words. Mormon records the result was that "they *all* cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken" (Mosiah 5:2; emphasis added), and they entered a covenant with God.

This example may best represent a blended learning environment because King Benjamin's prior reputation and relationship with his subjects must be taken into consideration. This was not the only time he had interacted with and instructed his people because he had previously spent his time serving them and ministering to their needs. His in-person service and relationship most likely had an impact on the people's willingness to receive and respond to his message. This may be evidence that combining traditional and asynchronous distance education creates powerful learning experiences.

Online religious educators should spend time engaging students, getting to know them, being personable, and if possible, serving them in appropriate and available ways. Establishing an environment of love, respect, and purpose is essential in distance education. As teachers rely on the experience of King Benjamin's people, they can increase their faith that both asynchronous

distance and blended educational delivery can have a spiritual impact, perhaps in different ways, but often similar to traditional delivery. This understanding may encourage teachers who struggle to adapt to methods outside of traditional classrooms.

Distance Education through Instruments

Many of the distance education experiences in the Book of Mormon happen early in the text and are displayed in the life of Lehi and his family. Before embarking on the greater portion of their journey in the wilderness, the Lord provided the Liahona to guide Lehi. God used the Liahona as a mediating form of communication to his prophet. It was a miraculous and “curious” instrument to deliver guidance (1 Nephi 16:10). This instrument was like an inspired interactive compass directing them where they should travel (see 1 Nephi 16:10, 16, 28) and even offered text-based communication (see 1 Nephi 16:26–27, 29).

The Liahona as an instrument of teaching enhanced their experience causing powerful emotional reactions, possibly due to the shock factor and the miraculous nature of the messages they received through it. Interestingly there is no record of the Liahona being used for divine communication after Lehi’s family crossed into the promised land, yet it remained with them, possibly as a symbol of the Lord’s power, deliverance, and divine communication. It is, however, revered for generations and passed down for centuries. This mediating form of communication worked according to their faith and may have facilitated an increase of faith during their travels.

The Liahona has similarities with modern distance education. Unlike visions where images are shown or teachers can be seen through mediated means, the Liahona operated much like a text-based distance learning platform. The Liahona had the potential for both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Religious educators determine the content and invite their students to learn, often through text-based messages such as chats, announcements, content-rich modules, directions for assignments, email or inbox messages, and interactive discussion boards. Most of these messages are published at the teacher’s discretion but can be accessed on the timetable and needs of students. Through these text-based means, teachers can communicate and send helpful messages that facilitate a community of inquiry and spiritual presence.

Distance Education through Dreams or Visions

Among the earliest forms of distance education recorded in the Book of Mormon are dreams and visions. Through these means, God can powerfully communicate vast quantities of information. The combination of sight and sound enhance the experience and solidify the message. Dreams and visions are powerful mediating methods that help learners to gain or strengthen their witness of Jesus Christ. Through this medium, the Lord allowed some to see him and understand his mission while also communicating other powerful truths with clarity. Many had visionary experiences in the Book of Mormon that could have additional implications for distance learning. Only one vision will be addressed here.

After hearing his father's vision of the tree of life, Nephi sat pondering the message when he was "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord" (1 Nephi 11:1), receiving his own visionary experience. In his vision, Nephi was repeatedly instructed to "look" and see events unfold before him. He often wrote that he "beheld" and "saw" the events and conveyed what he witnessed. Nephi was separated from these events by time and distance; thus, he was experiencing distance education. This synchronous²⁵ experience provided him with opportunities to explain what he saw, process, and express his understanding, declare his testimony, and learn for himself while receiving tutoring from a heavenly instructor. In this circumstance, the mediated form of communication would be his vision, through which he came to better understand the love of God, the mission of the Savior, and the importance of the record he was writing.

Nephi's instructors modeled powerful experiential teaching, promoting self-discovery through guided means. Inspired questions, clarifying statements, and clear instructions to help facilitate this experience. This vision had a profound spiritual and emotional impact on Nephi as each aspect of the community of inquiry were realized in combination with spiritual presence. Nephi's connection with the Spirit of the Lord was not somehow limited because of distance delivery. He learned about and potentially strengthened his witness of many doctrinal truths related to the plan of salvation.²⁶ This is significant because it further demonstrates that distance education can effectively convey gospel truths and is not limited by subject.

Distance education can be a powerful means of encouraging deep learning. Taking effective righteous action is an essential aspect of learning deeply,²⁷ and those who experienced dreams and visions in the Book of Mormon

acted on the divine messages they received. Dreams and visions cannot be facilitated by teachers or online learning methods. However, recognizing the potential of distance learning as shown through this experience could inspire teachers to employ distance learning methods, seek to enhance the student experience, employ community of inquiry principles, and potentially pattern their online teaching after the methods used in the Book of Mormon. Employing images and videos with graphics and music can allow students to see and witness dramatized depictions for themselves. Through these means, online instructors can promote testimony-building experiences and expand cognitive understanding, while pointing their students to Jesus Christ.

Distance Religious Education Challenges

There are benefits of distance educational delivery, yet many potential challenges also exist. Lack of student interest and motivation, irregular participation, technology limitations, feelings of isolation due to lack of connection with teachers and students, and enrollment difficulties are among many. Socio-economic challenges may amplify online learning challenges as students lack the finances for appropriate technology or internet access.²⁸ During much of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have not had the option of in-person learning, which has forced them into online classrooms. For some, the lack of choice may have altered attitudes toward online learning which could impact its effectiveness.

One important challenge was addressed through Nephi's experience in the concluding chapter of his record. Nephi recognized the difficulty of mediated forms of communication when he said, "I cannot write all things . . . ; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking" (2 Nephi 33:1). It appears he felt limited in his ability to powerfully convey God's message through writing and worried about how individuals would receive his message. Moroni similarly experienced this challenge and brought his concern to the Lord (see Ether 12:23–29). Nephi appeared to notice a difference in his teaching when he could see people face-to-face rather than through distance methods. He had witnessed that "when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men" (2 Nephi 33:1). Some modern-day teachers have felt and experienced similar feelings transitioning to remote delivery.

Teachers of religious education can appreciate the joy of witnessing spiritual edification (see Doctrine and Covenants 50:22). Like Nephi, teachers may

better perceive spiritual presence in the experience of their students through real-time traditional classroom methods. Teaching requires observing, listening, and discerning student's understanding followed by determining what to say under the direction of the Holy Ghost.²⁹ Though these aspects of teaching may be more easily perceived in a classroom setting, distance education also allows for similar formative feedback from students.

Synchronous online classes allow teachers to observe, listen to, and discern their student's needs and understanding, though mediated communication may require adaptation. For example, a student in a traditional classroom may provide nonverbal signals that could be difficult to see in a synchronous meeting. Students may also be distracted by situations outside of the teacher's view that can impact their learning experience. However, in some ways using software like Zoom allows teachers to better see everyone in the classroom and discern nonverbal communication due to the proximity of their images on a teacher's computer screen. Reliance on real-time online polls or chat features can provide teachers with additional opportunities to gauge student learning. Distance education may require teachers to refine their ability to observe, listen, and discern while altering perceptions of what those aspects look like through mediated communication.

Asynchronous online teachers may need to use techniques and capabilities inherent in the learning management system to better observe, listen to, and discern student needs and understanding. Teachers can employ discussion boards, assignments, and quizzes that allow for individual understanding to be conveyed to the instructor. Online feedback also provides teachers with additional one-on-one teaching opportunities. Poor patterns of participation or lack of depth in student's written work may provide cues to teachers that they ought to intervene and engage students.³⁰ Effectively developing cognitive, teacher, social, and spiritual presence in their classes may also assist the realization of those essential teaching aspects.

The Impact of Distance Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the challenges inherent with distance methods, delivering religious education through online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic has yielded some powerful results. Not all students responded the way teachers might have hoped and no delivery method is without difficulty. Some

students who regularly failed to engage in face-to-face classroom experiences blossomed in distance settings, though the opposite is also true.

At the end of the 2019–20 school year, I invited seminary students studying the Book of Mormon to complete the semester with a final post in Canvas about their remote seminary experience. Online institute students, studying the Teachings and Doctrines of the Book of Mormon course, were asked to share midsemester feedback about their class experience, specifically regarding weekly Zoom gatherings. Student responses were gathered and categorized based on their comments.³¹ They reported increased gospel knowledge, specifically of God’s awareness of them, expressed personal spiritual growth, enhanced their understanding of their role as a learner, and other benefits of online interaction.

Not all online experiences with the online transition were positive. Some students struggled with attendance, distancing themselves from class due to lenience on course credit and other circumstances. It should be noted that several seminary students did not complete the course. This challenge was not unique to emergency remote teaching but was heightened by the difficult circumstances students faced during the pandemic. Many of those who struggled with the online transition and attendance did not respond to the survey questions in the module. Collecting and gathering their responses would add perspective. Those who responded recognized various benefits of having a distance option during the pandemic, despite the difficulty. Some of their responses related to pandemic-specific challenges, yet their feedback communicated the value of online religious education.

Knowledge of God and His Awareness

Students reported they had come to better understand that Heavenly Father knows them and can reach them despite being isolated from others. One student wrote, “By doing remote seminary, I have learned that we can feel the Spirit always. We don’t have to be in a classroom, or at church, the Spirit can be wherever we are.” Feeling the Holy Ghost through distance education was eye-opening for some. One student reported that they came to know that Heavenly Father was aware of them when they felt the same Spirit through distance learning as they did in face-to-face classes. Others stated, “Participating in this final quarter of seminary I have learned that God knows each and every single one of us” and “We are not alone, we are loved, we are known.” Another student echoed a similar feeling when they wrote, “As I’ve

been going over a few things that we did at the beginning of remote seminary, I remembered how strongly I learned that Jesus Christ is truly aware of me, and all of us. He knows what each of us face every day.”

Personal Spiritual Growth and Development

One of the most common themes from student feedback was recognition of their spiritual growth and development through online learning. One student stated, “As I’ve done online seminary, I have had many incredible spiritual experiences. I have never learned more or been more in the scriptures before, nor have I ever felt more sure of the truthfulness of things I have read or listened to. I have faith in Jesus Christ.” Through distance learning, one said they had “strengthened [their] testimony in such a great way.” Multiple students expressed that they felt closer to the Savior and felt a spirit of peace and comfort. Others expressed an increase in their faith in God, a desire to live more like Christ, gratitude for the experience, and enhanced personal scripture study habits.

Personal Responsibility as a Learner

Many felt an increase in their responsibility as a student, and they recognized the law of the harvest in their efforts. Students observed that distance learning often required more of them and that they played a more essential role in their learning experiences than previously recognized. One student stated that God “knows how to reach out to us and to bring us back to him, but the other half of the relationship is how we respond.” Self-discipline is required for online learning to succeed and one student recognized the benefits when they said, “It hasn’t been easy to participate, . . . but every time I jump in, focus on the lesson and the Spirit, I always leave a little happier and the day is a little easier.” Another student connected their efforts to the benefits they experienced when they stated,

Remote seminary reminds me to take a break and fill up my cup spiritually. . . . I know that seminary will benefit all who sincerely devote themselves to the lessons and the scriptures! If you come with a willing heart, the Spirit can teach you how to face your adversaries! When I do that, it feels as if the lessons were made for me and I can feel Heavenly Father’s love for me! When I asked questions, the Spirit taught me on a personal level. Some days are hard, and others I’ll be feeling great but no matter where I’m at or what I’m going through when I turned to God, I wasn’t left comfortless and sometimes the exact message I needed came in that day’s lesson.

Benefits of Synchronous and Asynchronous Interaction

Discussion boards have great potential to engage students and increase learning.³² These discussions are often used to facilitate valuable student-to-student interaction. However, in some secular online learning environments, interaction with the teacher and content has been reported to be more beneficial for students than interaction with other learners.³³ Students reported positive experiences with both teachers and students from their seminary and institute courses.

Students stated that they were inspired and strengthened as they met. One student wrote, “It was so inspiring to read everyone’s testimonies and experiences in the Easter lesson,” and some even encouraged others to build their testimonies. A student stated, “By studying and sharing my testimony and hearing all of your testimonies, I have that confidence in my own testimony now.” One student observed, “Even though we aren’t meeting face-to-face, we can still be able to strengthen and lift each other up during these scary times.”

Synchronous meetings were sometimes preferred compared to asynchronous class delivery. Some stated that they looked forward to their gathering because the Spirit they have felt has helped them through these global challenges. A student who is not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expressed concern with interacting with other classmates due to having different religious views. They were encouraged to join, both in discussion boards and Zoom meetings, and expressed comfort and gratitude for doing so. One online institute student shared, “The guided study has been good, but the gatherings are what bring a whole new light to my studies and strengthen my testimony every week. Hearing other people’s thoughts and testimonies while also getting the opportunity to share my feelings and beliefs is the best exercise for my faith and testimony.”

Referring to the challenges brought on by the pandemic, one student stated, “The gatherings have been my favorite part of taking this course. During this quarantine, it has been very difficult for me to be so isolated from the rest of the world. I have felt very lonely, but having a weekly meeting has given me a reason for hope. I love this gospel and to be able to discuss it and different principles and doctrines has provided me with that comfort and company that I have fully wanted. To be able to talk all together, I have felt the Spirit so strongly confirming to me that I am exactly where I need to be.”

Distance Education Can Impact Traditional Classrooms

Traditional classrooms and distance education require different approaches and skillsets.³⁴ Teachers who seek to simply transition their current teaching skills to a fundamentally different delivery system may become frustrated and less effective,³⁵ though some principles of teaching overlap and can be implemented in both deliveries. Student engagement activities readily used in a traditional classroom may become difficult to implement in synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Similarly, the use of written discussion boards may not directly translate to the traditional classroom. Aspects of traditional classroom teaching can impact distance delivery and experience with online teaching can also impact the traditional classroom. If teachers fail to bring what they learned from emergency remote teaching to both future online and traditional classrooms, valuable insights could be lost.

Teachers in higher education who went from traditional to online classrooms have found challenges in delivering online education to their students. Through this transition, some teachers have recognized that shorter course material generates greater interest and prevents students from disengaging.³⁶ Some religious educators who transitioned from traditional classrooms to online delivery due to COVID-19 found it important to adapt the material in their modules to better meet the needs of students. Others discovered they could still provide a powerful, relevant learning experience, but do so with shorter modules. Creating brief modules could be less daunting to students who were already facing a host of emotional concerns and educational adjustments.

Adapting by creating shorter, more engaging modules may be a challenge for some teachers. Perhaps they can relate with the Book of Mormon writers who consistently told their audience that they could not include everything.³⁷ Despite the Book of Mormon writers being selective of material to include and leaving out details they may have felt were important, powerful spiritual experiences are still available to readers. As teachers return to traditional delivery or continue to transition to distance education methods, they may rely on their ability to facilitate shorter, engaging, and more student-focused spiritual learning experiences. This may help respond to Chad Webb's plea that students "need to trust that you know and understand them and that you are willing to adapt to meet their needs."³⁸

Conclusion

Distance education through online methods, especially during emergency remote teaching, can be a challenging skill set to develop. Transitioning from a traditional classroom to distance learning methods has its challenges, despite students feeling life displacement from COVID-19. Following patterns in the Book of Mormon, recognizing the consistent use of distance education techniques throughout religious history, and valuing the powerful means by which God can communicate will hopefully inspire religious educators to adapt their skills and better accommodate distance in religious education. The Book of Mormon is evidence that God can deliver his messages at a distance.

Church leaders have encouraged the use of the internet to further the Lord's work.³⁹ They have invited individuals to "seek personal revelation from heaven for ways we can use technology to connect with others" and "continue to learn and become better at using the internet to proclaim the gospel and to bless God's children."⁴⁰ Church Commissioner of Education Paul V. Johnson invited religious educators to willingly adapt to technological and administrative changes.⁴¹ As religious educators seek to implement, experiment with, and refine distance education skills, the Lord can enhance their abilities "line upon line, precept upon precept," knowing that "unto [them] that receiveth [he] will give more" (2 Nephi 28:30).

Notes

1. Charles Hodge, Stephanie Moore, Barb Lockee, Torrey Trust, and Aaron Bond, "The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning," <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>.
2. Jennifer J. Roberts, "Online Learning as a Form of Distance Education: Linking Formation Learning in Theology to the Theories of Distance Education," *HTS Theologiese/Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): 4.
3. Roberts, "Online Learning," 2.
4. Roberts, "Online Learning," 6.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign*, November 1986, 6. He stated, "Each of the major writers of the Book of Mormon testified that he wrote for future generations." Some examples are found in 2 Nephi 25:8; Mormon 5:8–15; and Mormon 8:14–16, 26–35.
6. David A. Bednar, "An Evening with a General Authority: Elder Bednar" (7 February 2020) and Liz Liljenquist, "Elder David A. Bednar Meets with the Young Single Adults and Youth of the Africa West Area" (18 October 2016), <https://africawest>

.churchofjesuschrist.org/elder-david-a-bednar-meets-with-the-young-single-adults-and-youth-of-the-africa-west-area?lang=eng-afw.

7. John Hilton III, Kenneth Plummer, Ben Fryar, and Ryan Gardner, “Comparing Spiritual Outcomes between Students in One General Education Distance Religion Course with Students in the Same Face-to-Face Course,” *Religion & Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 107.

8. D. Randy Garrison, Terry Andersen, and Walter Archer, “Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education,” *The Internet and Higher Education* 2, nos. 2–3 (2000): 89.

9. Garrison, Andersen, and Archer, “Critical Inquiry,” 89–90.

10. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, “Critical Inquiry,” 92–93.

11. Zoi Sidiropoulou and Ilias Mavroidis, “The Relation Between the Three Dimensions of the Community of Inquiry and the Learning Styles of Students in a Distance Education Programme,” *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning* 14, no. 23 (2019): 188.

12. Kim B. Clark, “Deep Learning and Joy in the Lord” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Annual Training Broadcast, 13 June 2017)

13. Gospel Topics Essays, “Book of Mormon Translation,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

14. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerritt J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61.

15. Lori Newbold, Global Faculty Meeting, Online Teaching and Learning in Seminaries and Institutes Broadcast, 22 May 2020.

16. Benson, “The Book of Mormon,” 6.

17. Chad H Webb, “An Invitation to Study the Doctrine and Covenants” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast, 5 August 2014).

18. Genesis 6:16a states that “some rabbis believed it was a precious stone that shone in the ark” of Noah. It is not known whether the brother of Jared relied on this knowledge or tradition in his effort to resolve their challenge with light in the vessels.

19. Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 89.

20. Multiple references in the scriptures state that the Holy Ghost can dwell in those he ministers to, possibly conveying proximity rather than a distance experience (see Doctrine and Covenants 8:2; 130:22). Clarifying this idea, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, “The Holy Ghost as a personage does not inhabit the bodies of mortal [beings], but that member of the Godhead dwells in a [person] in the sense that his promptings, the whisperings of the Spirit, find lodgment in the human soul. When the Holy Spirit speaks to the spirit in [a person], the Holy Ghost is thereby dwelling in [them].” *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 1:738). President Marion G. Romney stated that the Holy Ghost has similarities with the Light of Christ in that “the influence, power, and gifts of the Holy Ghost may be manifest everywhere at the same time.” “The Holy Ghost,” *Ensign*, May 1974, 90. The physical proximity of the Holy Ghost is not required in order for him to deliver for his messages or for his influence to be felt. These insights offer further clarification that mediated messages communicated through the Holy Ghost may be considered distance education experiences.

21. Wilford Woodruff, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 49.

22. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Divine Gift of Repentance,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 40.

23. Enos’s experience describes both methods used by the Holy Ghost in Doctrine & Covenants 8:2 where the Lord declared that the Holy Ghost speaks to an individual’s mind and heart. Speaking about revelation, James E. Faust linked Enos 1:10 and Doctrine & Covenants 8:2 when he said, “How is inspiration received? Enos stated, ‘And while I was thus struggling in the spirit, behold, the voice of the Lord came into my mind’ (Enos 1:10). One does not necessarily hear an audible voice. The spirit of revelation comes by divine confirmation. ‘I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart,’ says the Lord in the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 8:2): “Communion with the Holy Spirit,” *Ensign*, May 1980, 14. President Russell M. Nelson recently stated, “In the Godhead, the Holy Ghost is the messenger. He will bring thoughts to your mind which the Father and Son want you to receive.” “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 90.

24. Mosiah 26:12–32 and Mosiah 28:6–7 are examples of individuals approaching God with questions and the Lord replying through the Holy Ghost.

25. Nephi stated that he saw his teacher, the Spirit of the Lord, and that he was “in the form of a man,” and that they conversed “as a man speaketh with another” (1 Nephi 11:11). Once the Spirit of the Lord departed, an unidentified angel descended and guided Nephi through the remainder of this intense revelatory experience. It is unknown whether Nephi physically was moved or if he remained in the location where he sat pondering. He stated multiple times that he was carried away by the Spirit and once that his body was taken up into a mountain (see 1 Nephi 15:1; 2 Nephi 5:25). Whether physically carried away or taught in vision by the Spirit, this experience has implications for distance education. If Nephi were physically carried to a different location then his teachers may have been physically present with him and this could resemble more of a face-to-face classroom experience. If the Spirit of the Lord and the angel in Nephi’s learning experience were part of the vision rather than physically present teachers, meaning that were only present through that means of communication and if the vision closed, so did the interaction between teacher and student, then this would then be considered a synchronous distance learning experience and Nephi and his teachers were connecting at the same time through mediated delivery. In this way, Nephi’s experience could resemble a distance or online learning experience through a mediated method such as Zoom or Webex rather than a face-to-face traditional classroom.

26. The following are doctrinal topics Nephi could have gained insight about: Godhead, 1 Nephi 11:1–31; plan of salvation, 1 Nephi 15:20–26; Atonement of Jesus Christ, 1 Nephi 11:32–33; Restoration, 1 Nephi 13:20–42; prophets and revelation, 1 Nephi 11–14; priesthood and priesthood keys, 1 Nephi 12:7; 14:14; ordinances and covenants, 1 Nephi 11:27; 15:18; marriage and family, 1 Nephi 11:15–20; commandments, 1 Nephi 11:25; 13:40.

27. Kim B. Clark, “Deep Learning and Joy in the Lord” (Seminaries and Institutes Training Broadcast, 13 June 2017).

28. Alanna Gillis and Laura M. Krull, “COVID-19 Remote Learning Transition in Spring 2020: Class Structures, Student Perceptions, and Inequality in College Courses,” *Teaching Sociology* (2020): 14.

29. David A. Bednar, “Becoming a Preach My Gospel Missionary,” *New Era*, October 2013, 6.

30. Irena Galikyan and Wilfried Admiraal, “Students’ Engagement in Asynchronous Online Discussion: The Relationship Between Cognitive Presence, Learner Prominence, and Academic Performance,” *The Internet and Higher Education* 43 (2019): 7.

31. Students are not identified by name or gender. All comments gathered from seminary students came from Gilbert, Arizona. Each statement was posted in a Canvas module during their final assignment in remote seminary. Institute student’s comments came from a quiz question posted mid-semester as part of the online institute pilot, many of which were BYU Pathway students.

32. Kelly McKenna, Karen Gebhardt, and Levi Altringer, “Exploring Community in Discussion Board Activities,” *The Online Journal of Distance Education and e-Learning* 7, no. 3 (2019): 186.

33. Emtinan Alqurashi, “Predicting Student Satisfaction and Perceived Learning within Online Learning Environments,” *Distance Education* 40, no. 1 (2019): 144.

34. Cathy Stone and Matthew Springer, “Interactivity, Connectedness and ‘Teacher Presence’: Engaging and Retaining Students Online,” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 59, no. 2 (2019): 152.

35. Sally J. Baldwin, “Assimilation in Online Course Design,” *American Journal of Distance Education* 33, no. 3 (2019): 197.

36. Baldwin, “Assimilation,” 205.

37. Jacob 1:2, Jacob 4:1–2, Jarom 1:2, Omni 1:30, and Words of Mormon 1:5 are examples.

38. Chad H Webb, “We Have Not Come This Far to Only Come This Far” (Seminaries and Institutes Annual Training Satellite Broadcast, 9 June 2020).

39. M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Ensign*, July 2008, 62.

40. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Embracing the Future of Missionary Work,” Newsroom, 14 June 2020. <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/embracing-the-future-of-missionary-work>.

41. Paul V. Johnson, “What More Might the Lord Be Willing to Give Us?” (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Satellite Broadcast, 6 August 2013).