Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education

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Ecologies of faith in a digital age:
Spiritual growth through online education

S. D. Lowe and M. E. Lowe
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press

Reviewed by Eric Fehr

Over the past decade, enrollment in online education has grown at an astounding rate as access to distance programs has increased through the rise of the internet and digital medias. Lowe & Lowe provide Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age at an integral time for Christian Higher Education as many institutions have begun to invest in the increased accessibility of learning. The book seeks to provide a 'how to' answer for higher education professionals for engaging students spiritually in online education but may leave the reader wondering how to achieve what the authors propose. Lowe & Lowe provide an excellent overview of bioecological systems in nature, social and psychosocial ecological models, and scriptural emphasis of ecological connections in the Christian Faith. Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age could be the beginning of answering greater questions for many student affairs practitioners dealing with developing students in the digital space of Higher Education.

The authors' thesis is that thinking ecologically about spiritual growth and online student engagement could have "significant implications for and application to our practice of online Christian education" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). They structure their manuscript into three parts: a biblical theology of ecology, spiri-

tual formation through digital ecologies, and ecological connections to Christ and community. Part one introduces the reader to the idea of ecological motifs found in Scripture; images of Eden, the power of Parables, and how ecology in the Body of Christ functions all weave a beautiful story of an interdependent creation for the reader.

Part two draws on part one to suggest that as the Body of Christ is interconnected – creation was designed ecologically – the reader should consider an ecological framework for online education to be viable. Lowe & Lowe discuss how they have viewed growth in online spaces, how they began to design learning ecologies, and the power of influence in social spaces. To further support their thesis, the authors draw on narratives from students who responded positively of growth and support through their online educational experiences in this section.

Part three seeks to further cement the idea that creation was designed ecologically and support the authors' thesis by discussing ecological connection to Christ, Christian-to-Christian, in interactions with others, and the idea of ecological sanctification. Lowe & Lowe draw on the idea that all Christians are ecologically connected to Christ and other Christians, and support this with Scripture. They also use a well-developed argument for how Christians interact with each other online and how positive interaction and holiness can lead to further sanctification of other believers.

While the authors utilize much personal insight and experiences they have had through multiple academic placements in Christian Higher Education, they provide fair reasoning using well-known ecological model theories such as Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. Their thesis is well supported by Scripture and by human development research, showing how environments do shape individuals and that every person can have a large impact on those they connect with.

Professionals in higher education may still be left asking a few questions. While Lowe & Lowe seek to support their thesis with unsolicited, positive experiences from previous students these claims are unreferenced for the reader's review and there are no assessment tools or outcomes provided to prove the true success of development efforts. This leads to question if the authors can back up their claims using assessment that a student majority found satisfaction and spiritual growth in online education. Part two also discusses a study on the social lives of teenagers by Danah Boyd, in which the authors reflect that Boyd's find-

ings included a discovery that "teens would much rather gather together with their friends in person than through digital platforms" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). A second question the reader may have is why focus so much on engaging students in online education when research shows that many would find greater development and satisfaction from in-person experiences?

The discussion on ecologies and the insight the authors provide to spiritual ecologies is valuable in thinking about the interconnectedness in the Body of Christ but falls short in delivering professionals with an actionable plan to engage online students in development. Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age uses strong reasoning to support a powerful focus on developing spiritual formation in online settings but lacks both data-driven results and a plan of action for the reader to utilize. Much of the authors' advocation for digital ecologies for faith formation may be challenged with references to research in mental and emotional challenges caused by social networking; many studies have shown that prolonged use of social media can lead to depression (Pantic, 2014). The flow of the manuscript can also sometimes be confusing as the authors seem to jump back and forth between Scripture, theory research, and allusions to an actual plan of action.

In conclusion, Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age provides excellent Scripture support for digital spiritual formation and provides well-researched information on how various types of ecologies work. The lack of data-driven research and a useable plan of action for practitioners may make this text unusable as a source to achieve what the authors purport to have achieved in their professional roles. However, Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age begins raising questions to a conversation that many students affairs professionals must start to have as online enrollment climbs and traditional enrollment becomes a challenge for many: How do we develop students holistically who experience college education entirely online? This is a good question to ask if we are to truly provide comparable services for these students to those provided traditionally.

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References

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