Course Report

Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul Launched January-February 2014

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by
Jennifer A. Quigley
Doctoral Candidate in New Testament and Early Christianity
Harvard Divinity School
jaq187@mail.harvard.edu

with
Laura S. Nasrallah
Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity
Harvard Divinity School
lnasrallah@hds.harvard.edu

and
Zachary Davis
Fellow, HarvardX

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1. Introduction to the Course Report

In January 2014, a five-week course module titled Early Christianity: The Letters of PaulX was offered by Dr. Laura Nasrallah and HarvardX on the edX platform. This report was prepared by members of the teaching team using materials from the development stage of the course, information from the courseware, data collected from edX, and interviews and consultations with members of the teaching team as well as staff and researchers at HarvardX.

We provide this report as an archive of information for what we found to be a very engaging and educational experiment with teaching historical and biblical materials in a massive, open, online setting. We hope that the data herein may be useful to other instructors and researchers in the humanities and in the study of religion. We also intend it as a document that explains the pedagogical experiment of the class: that is, trying to harness this open and online forum for using feminist pedagogies and trying to foster a venue for informed, democratic, deliberative debate about historical texts that are in the Christian scriptures.

The report has nine sections following this introduction. The first two provide background to the development of the course including a discussion of the goals and pedagogical approach. The next three sections focus on the Letters of PaulX itself, including course structure, students, and course participation and activity. The final four sections deal with reflections on the course, including student demographics, learning, student and teaching team reflections, and information about the post-course life of the materials produced for the Letters of PaulX course.

2. The Development of the Letters of Paul X

Dr. Nasrallah teaches a semester-long course on the Letters of Paul at Harvard which is open to undergraduate and graduate students. This course emphasizes the historical context of the writing and first reception of Paul's letters and also focuses on the importance of these letters in modern day politics and religion. She decided to partner with HarvardX to create a course module developed from this brick and mortar class for five primary reasons:

1. To create a free, open, academic resource in the study of religion. Biblical studies as an aspect of the study of religion matters in the world today. Legal frameworks, family relations, and individual lives are transformed in positive and damaging ways as interpretations of biblical texts shape ethics; both violence and acts of peace emerge from religious communities. Dr. Nasrallah wanted to harness edX's power to create a free, open forum for balanced exploration of and discussion of a small set of biblical texts.

2. To experiment with using an online platform for the teaching of a humanities course.

3. To experiment with how and whether feminist pedagogies, which try to decenter the (star) professor as center of all knowledge and power, could work in an online setting.[1]

4. To see what materials HarvardX could help her to collect and to develop for use in the online module and for re-configured use for her brick and mortar classrooms at Harvard.

5. To provide doctoral students with a context for further training, since many future job opportunities in higher education may require skills in and/or articulate positions regarding the use of technology in education.

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[1] These experiments are happening in a variety of online communities, including the creation of Distributed Open Collaborative Courses, or DOCCS. This movement, started by FemTechNet in 2013 began with a course called Dialogues on Feminism and Technology. The following is a description of DOCCs from FemTechNet: "A MOOC (massive open online course) is typically organized and branded by a single (elite) institution. A DOCC recognizes and is built on the understanding that expertise is *distributed* throughout a network, among participants situated in diverse institutional contexts, within diverse material, geographic, and national settings, and who embody and perform diverse identities (as teachers, as students, as media-makers, as activists, as trainers, as members of various publics, for example)." "Docc 2013: Dialogues on Feminism and Technology," FemTechNet Commons, http://femtechnet.newschool.edu/docc2013/. Since this first course in the winter of 2013, there are now a dozen "Nodal Courses" taking place in 2014. For larger issues in feminist pedagogy and biblical studies, see the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, especially her *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Westminster John Knox, 2009).

A. Early Conversations

In preparing for and alongside our teaching team's work in preparing materials for HarvardX, from May to August 2013, Dr. Nasrallah held a mini-seminar on Ethics and Online Education with masters and doctoral students associated with the Letters of PaulX project. The seminar met for four sessions to discuss a variety of readings related to the emergence of MOOCs in higher education. Topics included Michael Sandel's *Justice* course and the response of San Jose State faculty as reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the essay "An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead" by Michael Barber et al and available on the Pearson website (http://www.pearson.com/avalanche/; Pearson calls itself "the world's leading education company"), Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and a variety of blog posts and articles related to the emergence and ethics of MOOCs. For a complete syllabus from the seminar, see **Appendix A**.

B. Course Learning Objectives

From previous brick-and-mortar iterations of the course, and after conversations with the teaching staff, Dr. Nasrallah composed the following learning objectives for the Letters of PaulX course.

1. To investigate the Pauline correspondence as a record of struggle and debate over key social, political, ethical, and theological or religious issues.

2. To learn about the Roman Empire in which the Pauline correspondence was penned.

3. To come to your own understanding of what the Pauline correspondence reveals about first-century debates about key issues, and to take responsibility for your interpretations.

4. To engage ancient texts with *disciplined intimacy*, understanding that these texts are both strange to our world and intimate to it. This disciplined intimacy involves learning and practicing close reading, as well as placing texts within their social, political, cultural contexts.

3. Pedagogical Approach

Dr. Nasrallah structured the Letters of PaulX in order to create a classroom atmosphere that fostered **accessibility**, **collaboration**, and **respectful dialogue**.[2]

A. Accessibility

Dr. Nasrallah created the Letters of PaulX as "a free and open access HarvardX version" of her course that was accessible to students of all experience levels but challenging enough so that even those familiar with the materials would find texts, frameworks, and questions with which to engage. In particular, she was interested in creating an online classroom in which students who understood the Bible as Word of God and as infallible would be able to work alongside students who had never opened the text before. The following is an excerpt from her introduction to the course:

> *The class is introductory. No question is too basic. That's not to say that the materials are always easy, but there are no advanced requirements, just an expectation that you'll enjoy studying this material, and that you'll be willing to enter into a greater larger community of collegial, critical, and academic investigation of these texts--a great host of witnesses, if you will.*
>
> *What kind of students might take this course? In case you're still concerned about how you might fit into the course or what sort of experience you could or couldn't bring to it, let me talk a bit about what kind of students I've had in this course in my classrooms at Harvard and elsewhere, and what kind of students you may be. I've had in my classroom undergraduates and graduate students. Some are Christians, evangelicals or UCC or Episcopalian. Some are Jews. Some are Muslims. Some are atheists. Some are Lutherans and love Paul. Some are in training to be in Christian ministry--some hoping to work in NGOs, some studying law or government, some heading to med school or campus ministry. All that's to say, everyone and anyone is welcome.*
>
> *In this introduction to the letters of the apostle Paul, I try to create a level playing field, so that the person who doesn't know how to look up Romans 8:28, and the person who memorized that text when she was five can virtually sit alongside each other and learn together.*

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[2] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2008) [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970].
bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2009).

B. Collaboration

Dr. Nasrallah structured the course to invite all participants, both students and teaching staff, to participate in learning together. She modelled this throughout the course in two primary ways: 1) by offering bibliographies ("Go Further" on the courseware) to note her own sources and influences and to point the students to those and further resources; 2) and by balancing short lecture videos with longer conversational videos with a variety of teachers, scholars, and interpreters. For six of the 13 course days, students were assigned a discussion video for viewing. These included four conversations with doctoral students, a discussion on teaching the bible in public schools with Dr. Diane Moore and Ms. Shauna Pellauer, a conversation about Rev. Dr. Krister Stendahl with his son Rev. John Stendahl, and a teaching video about ancient papyri and letter-writing with Princeton professor Dr. Annemarie Luijendijk. Dr. Nasrallah shared some of her pedagogical commitments with the class in the introduction to the course:

> *My pedagogical approach, that is, how I teach the course is as collaborative and democratic as it can be in this venue. I don't think that learning should only be about a consumer model, in which a student passively receives what the teacher authoritatively produces.*
>
> *Rather, students learn and students also produce knowledge. I'm grateful to be in a job in which I'm required to learn and write and think all the time.*
>
> *Whether in colleges or at computers, in cafes or at home, we can all be part of a creative process of studying interpretation. You'll add your knowledge, the questions and insights that emerge from your life experience and your critical engagement with that life experience and with other scholars' interpretations to the larger scholarly conversation.*
>
> *I also don't think that learning should be about a Socratic model. In Socrates' dialogues written in Plato's pen, Socrates manages to draw out truth and to best his philosophical opponents by asking hard questions that continually reveal how inept his dialogue partners are. The dialogues sometimes humiliate his discussion partners. I'm never for humiliation, even if I'm all for humility, because the texts we study together are difficult, and because our knowledge of the ancient world, given the gaps in our data from antiquity, is never complete.*
>
> *We have to be humble because we're sketching earnest but imperfect maps. Map is not territory, as the saying goes. The work of historiography, of the writing, of history is to lay out a range of well-considered possibilities, rather than to say, this is what really happened. Of course, we can do better or worse in our history writing and in our interpretation of the letters of Paul. Our task together is to collect more data from antiquity, and to hone our interpretations in relation to a study of a broad range of others' interpretations.*

C. Respectful Dialogue

Dr. Nasrallah's pedagogical and ethical commitments made fostering respectful dialogue one of the key learning goals of the course. That is, even if students would not remember key historical dates or significant scholarly approaches to Paul's letters, by engaging together in dialogue on the discussion fora, they would *practice key skills* in open, tempered discussion of religion. Such skills are grounded in academic discourse and allow for the cultivation of practices of open, respectful, deliberative discourse that can translate to other venues: the civic sphere, the religious community, even the family.

To that end, the teaching team structured the course with open discussion as the central interactive component in order to provide an opportunity for democratic dialogue. The teaching team wanted to model better civil and civic discourse in the course so that students would begin to model this with one another and in their communities. Dr. Nasrallah introduced the value of respectful dialogue at the beginning of the course:

> *Teaching this course is a joy and a complicated thing too, because some of you may have strong opinions about Paul. For some, Paul might be an old friend, articulating your own hopes about grace and redemption, modeling for you struggles about how to be an ethical human in the world.*
>
> *For others, Paul might be an enemy, the devolution of Christianity from Jesus' message. Actually, that's the way Thomas Jefferson characterized him. Some of you come to this course because Paul and his letters are an entirely unknown or neutral topic. For some, they're great or famous texts of Western culture. For some, the letters of Paul are a source for knowledge about ancient religion and philosophy in earliest Christianity.*
>
> *For some, these letters are evidence regarding Judaism in the diaspora in the first century. For some, they're source text for current philosophical work on equality, especially as this is discussed among European philosophers.*
>
> *For some of you, this is sacred text scripture, the word of God. Or you may feel that you fall into several of these categories. It'll be important to recognize throughout this course module that those who take the course alongside you may disagree with you. I encourage you to discover what is intellectually productive about that difference.*
>
> *It's important to recognize that you may find some of the readings troubling or uncomfortable, surprising or exciting. This is all a part of learning. Throughout, we'll find ways to speak respectfully and thoughtfully to each other about our agreements and disagreements. So we'll bring our experiences and our humility to the course hopefully. That's not to say that experience and humility are all that's needed. We'll also learn a good deal about the history of the Roman world, so that we have more and better data to bring to our work of interpreting Paul's letters. This course is in part about cultivating a love of the creative, imaginative, detective work of history writing.*

4. Structure of Letters of PaulX

The Letters of PaulX ran for five weeks, from January 6, 2014, to February 5, 2014, split into thirteen "days" of material. While students were encouraged to progress through the course materials at their own pace, days were released two or three times each week to facilitate the greatest number of students working through materials at approximately the same time. That is, the course module in its first iteration was synchronous, and students who did not begin alongside the others did express concerns and difficulty in "catching up," even if the teaching team had no expectations that students needed to act as a cohort day by day. Although some open, online learning experiences run well in an asynchronous manner, such an approach is difficult in an online, open experience in which discussion between students and between students and teaching staff is at the heart of the project and essential to the assignments.

Each day included readings, video lectures introducing the materials, images, bibliographies, and discussion questions. In addition, students were encouraged to participate in discussion on Facebook, to contribute in collaborative annotation exercises on Poetry Genius, and to make use of a course-developed Timemap tool. What follows are brief background into each of the major interactive aspects of the course, including discussion questions and the use of the edX course site discussion board, Poetry Genius, Facebook, and the Timemap.

A. Discussion Questions and the Discussion Board

The teaching team determined that one major skill that students could learn, and one desired outcome of the course, was to foster respectful conversations, informed by the scholarship presented in the videos, on the one hand, and developed by students as they practiced the skill of closer attention to details of ancient documents, making assertions based upon those documents (rather than assumptions about what the documents said, or reading the documents through the lens of later theology or "common sense" knowledge about religion). The teaching team also decided that we hoped students would emerge with certain historical facts (the relative datings of Paul's letters and Acts, what Josephus says about the Pharisees, some of the strategies of Roman imperial power). But we thought that an even more important learning outcome was for students to gain the skills in respectful dialogue, sustained by facts and argued from the details of ancient texts, with each other. That is, in a world in which differences in scriptural interpretation can fracture families, on the one hand, and communities holding to different scriptures can produce violence, on the other, the teaching team decided that our online course module should be a forum for gaining skills in conversing with others about differences in opinion regarding biblical interpretation. To put it most bluntly: while we hope our students will remember that 70 CE is the date of the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus, son of the emperor Vespasian, we thought it far more important that, two months or two years or twenty-two years after the course, they retain skills and dispositions in biblical interpretation and academic dialogue. We hope that in future iterations of our course or others,

collaborations can be developed so that we can contribute to long-term studies about the outcomes of such projects.

Because the teaching team had determined that it would attempt to cultivate in an online setting **accessibility**, **collaboration**, and **respectful dialogue**, we necessarily prioritized discussion in the course structure, asking questions to the students so that 1) they would write miniature "scholarly reflection papers," a well-known assignment in the humanities in Harvard brick and mortar classrooms; 2) they would respond to each other's scholarly reflections, respectfully offering critical comments and/or voicing their support or stating what they had learned. Of course, the teaching team was also active in commenting on student reflections.

Because of this emphasis on writing and dialogue, because some of our students were not familiar with or comfortable with the edX discussion platform, and because some of our students especially in less developed countries had slow internet connections and needed recourse to a variety of websites that might allow them access, we used three venues for the course. The edX platform was the primary site, but Facebook and Poetry Genius also provided locations for interaction.

B. The edX Platform

For each course day, students were encouraged to respond to "**Knowledge Checks**" and "**Discussion Questions**" on the **Discussion Board**, hosted on the edX Platform.

1. **Knowledge Checks** reinforced student understanding of concepts, terms, dates, and historical and cultural background introduced by Dr. Nasrallah in the day's videos. Sample answers written by the teaching team were posted within 24-48 hours of the posting of the checks. Knowledge checks allowed students to quiz themselves, but did justice to the fact that more than one right answer was possible. Our intention was that these Knowledge Checks helped students who were unfamiliar with the material to understand, summarize, and articulate important data from the course. More experienced students often offered corrections, additional information, or clarifications to their peers, and the teaching team occasionally weighed in before answers were posted to help monitor responses. Students were encouraged to cite the sources of their answers and to provide resources and/or bibliography if they adduced material from outside of the course. Typical days included 6-12 questions, dividing questions so that they immediately followed the relevant lecture video.

2. **Discussion Questions** were written by Dr. Nasrallah as open-ended prompts to encourage reflection, critical thinking, peer engagement, and debate. They were a way to assign "scholarly reflection papers" of brief length. These discussion threads were monitored more closely by the teaching team. After initial difficulties with the **Discussion Board** feature on the edX course site [see below for explanation], discussion questions were posted both to the Discussion Board and to Facebook.

3. Initially, the teaching team planned to use the **Discussion Board** exclusively on the edX course site for student and teaching team discussions and responses. However, within the first few hours of the launch of Day 1 on January 6, 2014, the edX discussion board crashed due to the overwhelming volume of student responses. Before switching the course page hyperlink to a new discussion thread, a single discussion thread for Day 1 asking students to introduce themselves to one another accumulated 640 responses.[3] Even when the Discussion Board was fixed, page load times for students, especially those with slower internet connections, was significant. One student posted the following comment to the course page on Facebook, which provides a good example of similar responses on various venues (from email to the edX discussion boards):

> *You and yours are making a lot of assumptions about how students from around the world can access each other and the web. Assumptions that from where I live are just flat wrong.*

The teaching team spent significant time in its first full meeting after course launch discussing solutions for the Discussion Board problems. We noted that on the edX platform, discussion threads loaded all responses to a thread at once, rather than loading the first 25 or 50 responses, with a tab at the bottom of the page to load more responses. This meant that even students with fast internet speeds were having significant wait times for a page to load potentially several hundred comments. Some students, especially those in locations where the only internet connections were dial-up, reported pages taking over an hour to load. edX improved this, limiting the number of responses loading at once, but the teaching team needed to make a quick decision about how to proceed with the discussion boards for the live course. The decision was made to allow students to post discussion responses either on the edX course site or on the Facebook page for the Letters of PaulX.

The teaching team also discussed the possibility of dividing the course into discussion board "sections" following the lead of the structure of the HeroesX course. The HeroesX course created different discussion threads for limited numbers of students, repeating the same discussion over numerous threads in order to keep discussions both active but of manageable size. We decided against this course of action in order to keep the largest number of students engaging with one another; we wanted to maximize opportunities for respectful dialogue among the course's full diversity of students. Practical concerns also influenced this decision. The HeroesX course relies upon a large contingent of alumni of the brick and mortar version of the course, who volunteer to monitor the discussion threads of a limited number of course "sections." The Letters of PaulX course had a full team of six: Dr. Nasrallah, four doctoral students in New Testament and Early Christianity serving as Teaching Fellows, and Zachary Davis, a HarvardX course fellow. Facilitating dozens of discrete threads for every set of discussion questions would have drawn significant teaching

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[3] Zachary Davis informed the teaching team that this volume of response on the Discussion Boards was unprecedented for an edX course. Other courses, even in the humanities, did not lean as heavily on the Discussion Board function for the bulk of student assignments and interactions. One notable exception is the course HeroesX, taught by Dr. Gregory Nagy.

time away from responding on other course venues, including Facebook, Poetry Genius, Twitter, and E-mail.

C. Poetry Genius[4]

Close reading is an essential component of work and courses in the humanities. Dr. Nasrallah wanted to find a way for students to practice this skill collaboratively, learning not only from the teaching team but also from one another. To this end, the Letters of PaulX partnered with Poetry Genius, whose self-described mission is

> *dedicated to the crowdsourced annotation of music, news, literature, history, and just about any other text you could imagine. We believe in collaborative close reading—that every text is made more understandable, and interesting, by our shared attention. Join us, and help build the world's greatest public knowledge project.*[5]

Poetry Genius hosted all of texts for the course, including both ancient and modern scholarly sources. Members of the course could highlight a section of text, for example Romans 16:7, and offer an annotation, with the possibility of adding text, images, and hyperlinks. Others can add their own comments, suggestions, as well as up-voting and down-voting annotations to help highlight exemplary work. The teaching team as well as members of the Poetry Genius editorial community were given editorial privileges, and the teaching team also created example annotations for texts.

Initially, edX was going to allow our course module to use Poetry Genius inside the edX platform. Despite a reversal in that decision, the teaching team continued to use Poetry Genius through hyperlinks on the course site out to Poetry Genius webpages. Poetry Genius assumed the copyright liability for the texts posted by hosting them on their site. Some students reported confusion and frustration over this double registration process, although Dr. Jeremy Dean, an employee of Poetry Genius, maintained an active discussion thread on edX, answering questions and troubleshooting for students. While students were not required to use Poetry Genius and could access all readings on the course site, students were encouraged to participate in collaborative annotation on all readings.

Poetry Genius proved popular with a subset of students. One example tells the story well. 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's longer letters, was assigned for the course. A single chapter of that letter (1 Corinthians 1) was annotated by 154 discrete contributors.[6] However, combined with the initial difficulties with the Discussion Board, the initial launch issues for Poetry Genius led to students engaging with one another and with the teaching team through a variety of mediums on several websites, leading to additional

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[4] In the summer of 2014, Poetry Genius rebranded as Genius, and what had been the "Poetry Genius" section of the site was renamed "Lit Genius." For this report, we have kept the name Poetry Genius because that is how the students and teaching team referenced the site during the course.

[5] "About Page," accessed June 16, 2014. http://Poetrygenius.com/Poetry-genius-about-lyrics. Poetry Genius has since rebranded as Genius, and this page has been archived as of August 2014.

[6] 1 Cor 1 (NRSV). http://poetry.Poetrygenius.com/St-paul-1-corinthians-1-nrsv-annotated.

challenges for the teaching team and potentially some segregation among students who chose to work in one venue instead of another. In some ways, however, the initial attempt towards collaborative annotation continues. While students can no longer post on the edX discussion board and few post on our Facebook site, public annotations continue on the texts that were uploaded to Poetry Genius for our course module.

D. Facebook

The course team created a Facebook page for the course titled Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul. As of the initial writing of this course report in June 2014, it had garnered 2,315 "likes." After receiving feedback asking for better access to discussions and course materials for those with significantly slower internet connection speeds, the course team made the decision not only to allow students to participate in discussions through Facebook, but also to take the course through Facebook. Videos, discussion questions, and knowledge checks were all posted to the course page. Students still needed to log in to edX (or link to Poetry Genius) to access the readings, and students working toward a certificate of completion needed to log in to edX to complete their self-assessment (more on this below), but otherwise, the Facebook page allowed students to access a more limited amount of materials.

The number of student responses posted to Facebook instead of on the course website was significantly smaller than those posted to the course discussion boards, and the number declined as the course progressed. For example, there were 69 responses on Facebook to the Day 3 Knowledge Check posts, while for Day 12, there were 22 responses on Facebook to the Knowledge Check posts. Posts were seen by a much larger number of people with a less steep drop-off as the course progressed; posts signed by Dr. Nasrallah by far reached the greatest number of people. For example, 2,299 people "saw" a short note from Dr. Nasrallah at the end of day 1, and a final note from Dr. Nasrallah a month after course close on March 5 (the last day students could work for a certificate of completion), reached 1,452 people. Few students seem to have "left" the course page, and the page's reach continues to be significant; on May 5, 2014, a member of the teaching staff posted an announcement for an in-person Q&A with Dr. Nasrallah in Boston, reaching 1,342 people.

E. Student-Generated Learning Sites

While the teaching team created various venues for the Letters of PaulX, students also created their own, whether in person or online. Several active non-English language threads emerged on the Discussion Board, a Spanish language course Facebook page was quite active, and one student created Portuguese translations of course lectures, posting them on Youtube. The course module ceased to be the property or production of the teaching team alone—a fact that was congruent with the pedagogical goals of the course, on the one hand, and was exciting and a bit overwhelming on the other.

F. Timemap

Dr. Nasrallah heads the Harvard New Testament Archaeology Project, which includes leading a travel seminar to Greece and Turkey every other year, as well as an online database of video and images collected from several decades of similar seminars. Wanting to share some of these media resources with the Letters of PaulX students, the course partnered with digital product designer Nicolas Pernier to create an interactive learning tool for the course. The team developed the Timemap, a combination of a timeline and interactive map, which is able to present multiple images with important metadata, including date, location, and descriptions, in a visually accessible educational format. Below is a screen capture of one particular timemap, showing the "pop-up" of an image of the theater at Delphi.[7]

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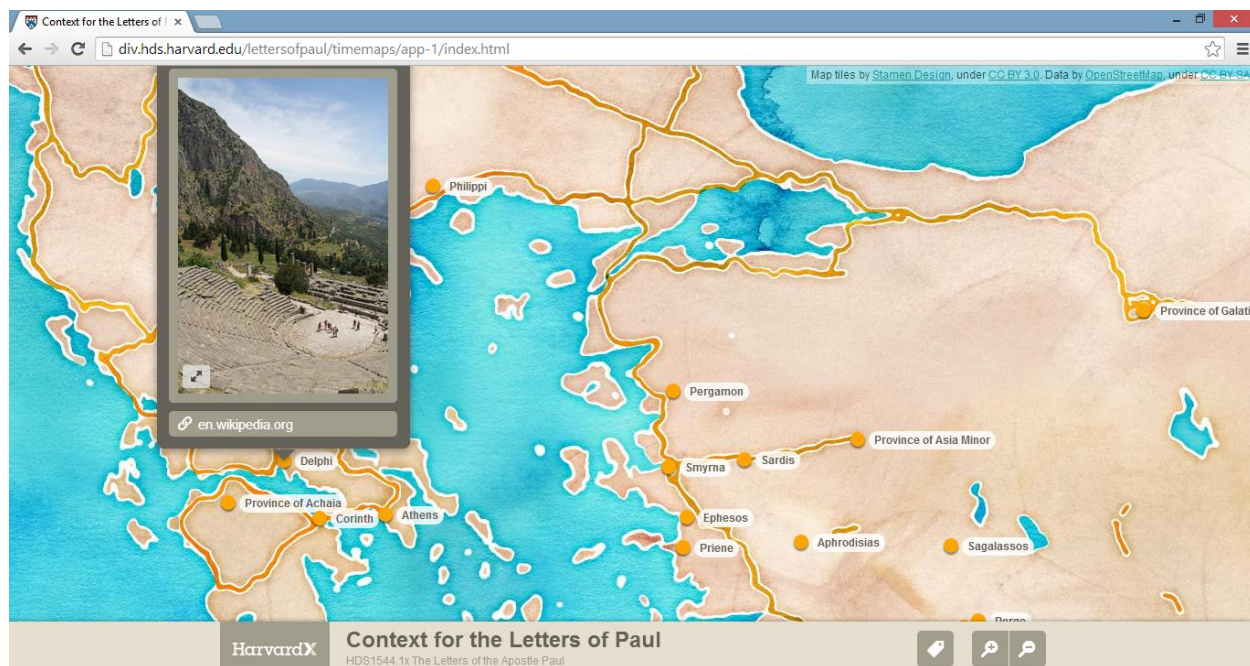
[7] More metadata is available if a student clicks on the image, bringing it into a centered pop-up with description below.

Given the limited development timeline for the project, the Timemap was restricted to an initial run of five narrative timelines, matched to particular course content. These included a timeline for the Context of the Letters of Paul, Selected Historical Context until Octavian, Roman Imperial History, Scripture and Canon, and Paul's Letters and Other Pauline Materials. The Timemap was hosted on the edX course site.

Students gave largely positive feedback to the Timemap. Other feedback included questions and response about ease of navigability and visual presentation, some of which led to small tweaks in the Timemap tool. Below are two comments which typify the initial response.

Comment 1

Yes! I am so pleased to see these new spatial and temporal maps added to the course. This is precisely the kind of the non-linear and interactive engagement the web excels in providing. More more more!

Comment 2

The timelines and maps are fantastic. I began looking at them and reading some of the text, and soon found that four hours had elapsed. Thank you for including these with the course materials! They add an extra dimension to the course. Hopefully these will be left in place as I would like to go back and further read more of the materials.

5. Video

The Letters of Paul employed four different kinds of video, including **studio lecture**, **modeled student discussions**, **guest expert conversations**, and **teaching staff office hour responses**.

A. Studio Lecture

The studio lecture videos comprised the bulk of recorded media and provided students core information on the range of subjects discussed in the course. They were filmed against a white background in the Mt. Auburn studio with a two-camera setup and a teleprompter. To aid student learning, the videos featured images, key vocabulary, dates, and illustrations. The illustrations were created by identifying particular concepts within the videos that would benefit from visual reinforcement.

Motion was also added to the illustrations when appropriate to increase visual interest. There were 48 total studio lecture videos, each an average of 3-4 minutes long.
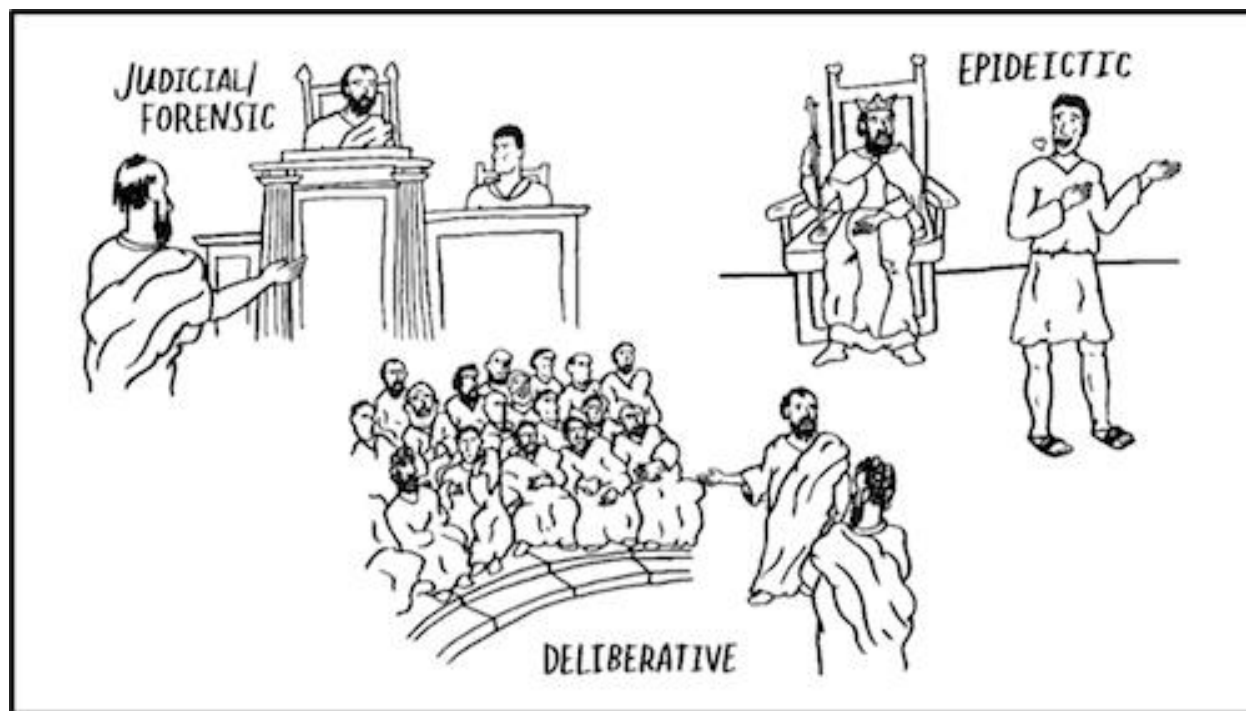
B. Teaching Staff Discussion

To model the kinds of conversation Dr. Nasrallah wanted to encourage among learners and to dive deeper into the subject matter, the teaching staff filmed three conversations. These were filmed at Harvard Divinity School in an effort to invite learners into the physical environment of HDS. The course included seven teaching staff discussions, each an average of 10 minutes long. Dr. Nasrallah would moderate, giving each member of the teaching staff time to reflect, ask questions, and offer ideas.

C. Guest Expert Conversation

To explore certain topics in more depth, guest experts were invited to participate in conversations with Dr. Nasrallah. These guests included: Dr. AnneMarie Luijendijk, Associate Professor of Religion at Princeton University; Rev. John Stendhal, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Newtons (ELCA); and Dr. Diane Moore, Senior Lecturer on Religious Studies and Education at Harvard Divinity School.

D. Teaching Staff Office Hours

Each week, different members of the teaching staff, including Dr. Nasrallah, took turns responding to student questions through an 'office hour' video response. These were generally completed at the respective homes or offices of the teaching staff with iPad or computer cameras both for ease of logistics and to create a more informal and intimate experience for the learners. There were a total of 5 office hour videos, each lasting approximately 30 minutes.
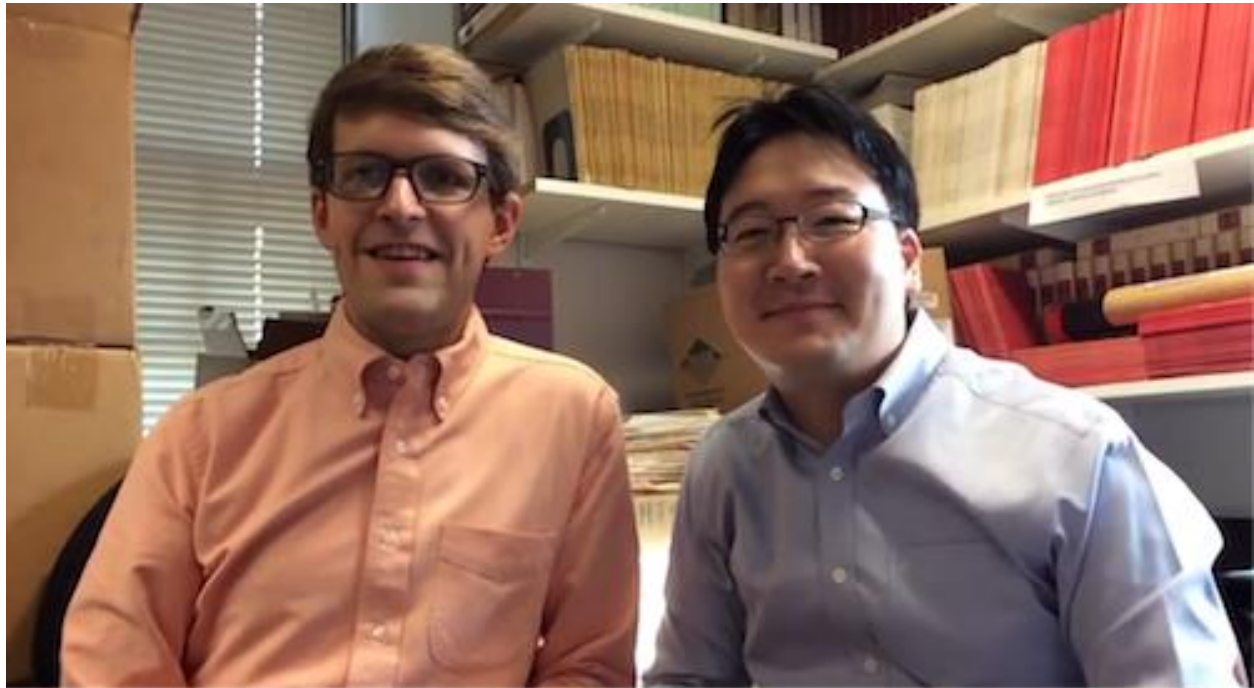
6. Assessment

The teaching team engaged in significant conversations about assessment during the course development period for the Letters of PaulX, particularly during the summer mini-seminar. Influenced by work from scholars such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and others about pedagogy, Dr. Nasrallah from the outset wanted the class to be as collaborative and democratic as possible. The teaching team discussed a number of possible assignments which would involve students as fellow interpreters and producers of knowledge, including peer-assessment on brief essays, portfolios for students to self-select their best work for the course, collaborative annotation of texts, images, and videos, among others.

The assessment tools available through edX as of course launch were limited insofar as they were geared primarily towards facilitating automated grading, assessing student learning through a variety of multiple-choice testing options. Such assessment tools required teaching teams to provide a "correct" answer against which student work is checked and could not support effectively the assessment of assignments that required the synthesis of knowledge, on the one hand, or a pedagogy that acknowledged a range of possible correct answers, on the other hand.

The teaching team discussed the fact that, in an ideal universe, our online course module could match what we do in our brick and mortar classrooms and office hours: teachers would offer detailed comments on each student paper; small discussion groups or seminars would meet over time to exchange ideas, develop trust, and aggregate knowledge and perspectives; individual student-teacher office hours would allow time to discuss goals, questions, progress. As is well known, such activities do not "scale" well in large online courses.

Because we could not assess each student individually, and because the sort of knowledge and practices of discussion and interpretation we wished students to cultivate cannot be assessed by any computer tool in an automated way, the teaching team decided to re-tool the idea of "contract grading" for our assessment mechanism. Contract grading involves clearly defined parameters for students to earn a particular grade, or in the case of the Letters of PaulX, to receive a certificate of completion. There is an emphasis on multiple, ungraded assignments, and a student may complete as many or as few assignments as she chooses.[8] In order to model one aspect of contract grading, the teaching team made the decision that students would self-report their participation levels in the course. The teaching team used the automated assessment tools on the edX course site to create a simple quiz at the end of each day's materials. If students self-reported completing 75% of course work, they would receive a certificate of completion. Given the last-minute switch with Poetry Genius being hosted off of the course site, the teaching team asked only three questions on the student self-assessments. Students were asked to answer yes or no to the following questions: Did

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[8] Odile Harter, "Making Your Own Grade: Contract Grading in the 21st Century," The Derek Bok Center Blog, http://blog.bokcenter.harvard.edu/2012/06/18/making-your-own-grade-ii-contract-grading-in-the-21st-century/.

you watch the Day _ videos?; Did you complete the Day _ readings?; Did you participate in the Day _ discussions? It was up to students not only to take responsibility for their own assessment, but also to make the determination about to what standard of engagement they held themselves in terms of participation in the collaborative elements of the course.

Some students initially expressed frustration over the self-assessment process, with most of the comments sharing concerns that other students could cheat the system and get a certificate of completion without truly "earning" it. After the process was clarified, however, and students were reminded that all edX courses at some level rely upon an honors system, students seemed open to the assessment method and even seemed to begin to learn something about the teaching team's pedagogical intentions behind the assessment. One student response from an end-of-course feedback discussion thread is telling:

> *I wonder what self-assessment means in the end. Anyone can tick all the boxes, and it doesn't reflect the level of participation or knowledge gained. Adding points for the participation in discussions and poetry genius could give a more real indication of the participation.* ***In the end though, each person has taken away what they wanted from the course. If some people just wanted a certificate, that is fine. If other people wanted to gain and expand their knowledge, then that is fine too. And if some, or hopefully many wanted both, then that is excellent.***[9]

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[9] Emphasis added by report authors.

7. The Participants of Letters of PaulX

A. Registrants and Geographic Distribution

As of summer 2014, The Letters of PaulX had 34,703 registrants from 171 countries.[10]

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
Estimated Worldwide Registration as of June 22, 2014

34,703 registrants
in 171 countries

Country-level percentages and enrollments estimated from registrants with available country.
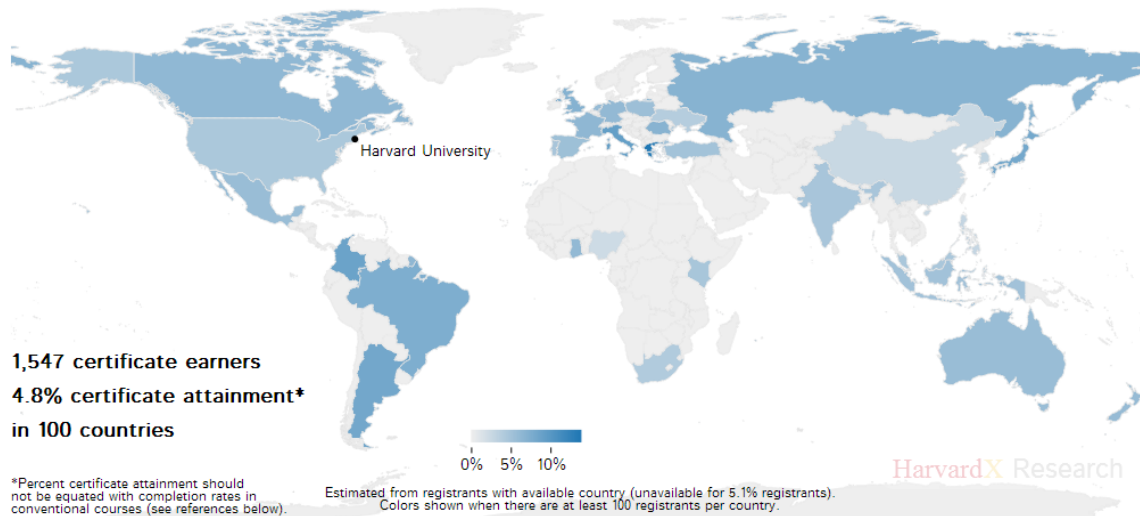5.1% of registrants have no available IP address, reported or recognizable country.

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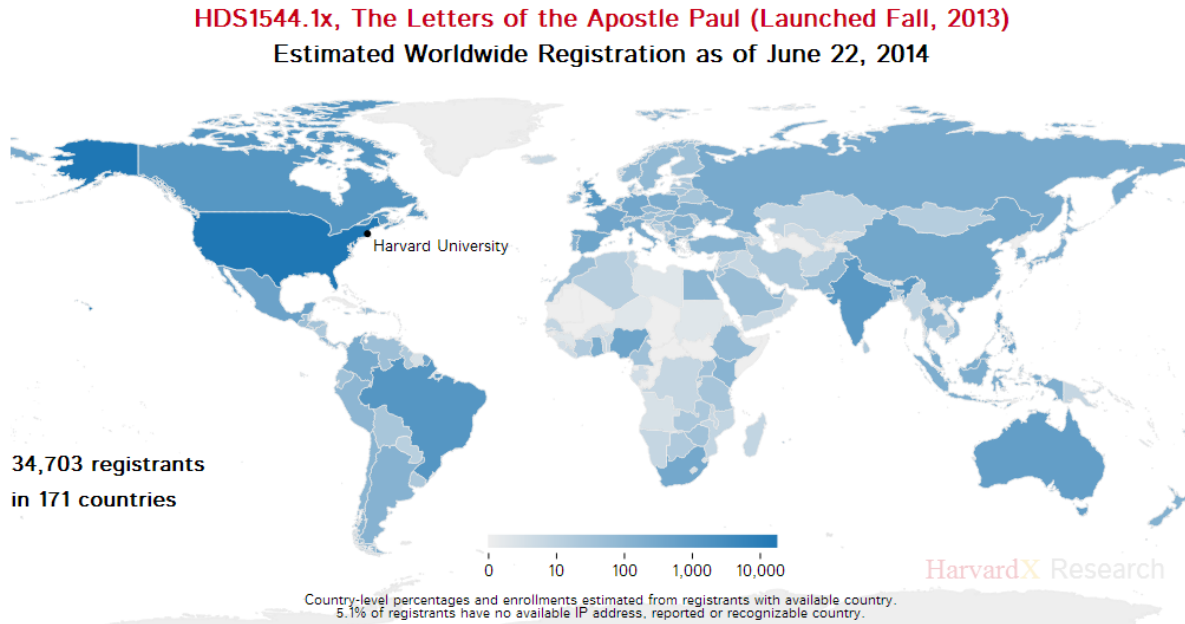
[10] S. O. Nesterko, D. T. Seaton, K. Kashin, Q. Han, J. Reich, I. Chuang, and A. D. Ho., World Map of Enrollment (HarvardX Insights, 2014), http://harvardx.harvard.edu/harvardx-insights/world-map-enrollment.

B. Certificate Earners and Geographic Distribution

1,547 students from 100 countries earned certificates of completion, a completion rate of 4.8%.[11] This number is lower than the average of all HarvardX courses, which have a completion rate of 7.3%.[12] However, 58.5% of countries represented in registration were also represented by certificate earners.

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
Estimated Worldwide Certificate Attainment as of March 6, 2014

1,547 certificate earners
4.8% certificate attainment*
in 100 countries

*Percent certificate attainment should not be equated with completion rates in conventional courses (see references below).

Estimated from registrants with available country (unavailable for 5.1% registrants). Colors shown when there are at least 100 registrants per country.

HarvardX Research

0%   5%   10%

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[11] S. O. Nesterkos, D. T. Seaton, K. Kashin, Q. Han, J. Reich, I. Chuang, and A. D. Ho., World Map of Certificate Attainment (HarvardX Insights, 2014). http://harvardx.harvard.edu/harvardx-insights/world-map-certificate-attainment.
[12] Ibid.

C. Gender and Enrollment

HarvardX MOOC enrollment on the whole is male-dominated; the average course breakdown is 59.3% male, 33.5% female, 0.2% other, and 7% not reporting.[13] The Letters of PaulX had moved slightly more toward gender parity, although again, male students made up the majority of registrants. For the Letters of PaulX, 53% of registrants were male, 39.4% female, 0.2% other, with 7.4% not reporting.[14]

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
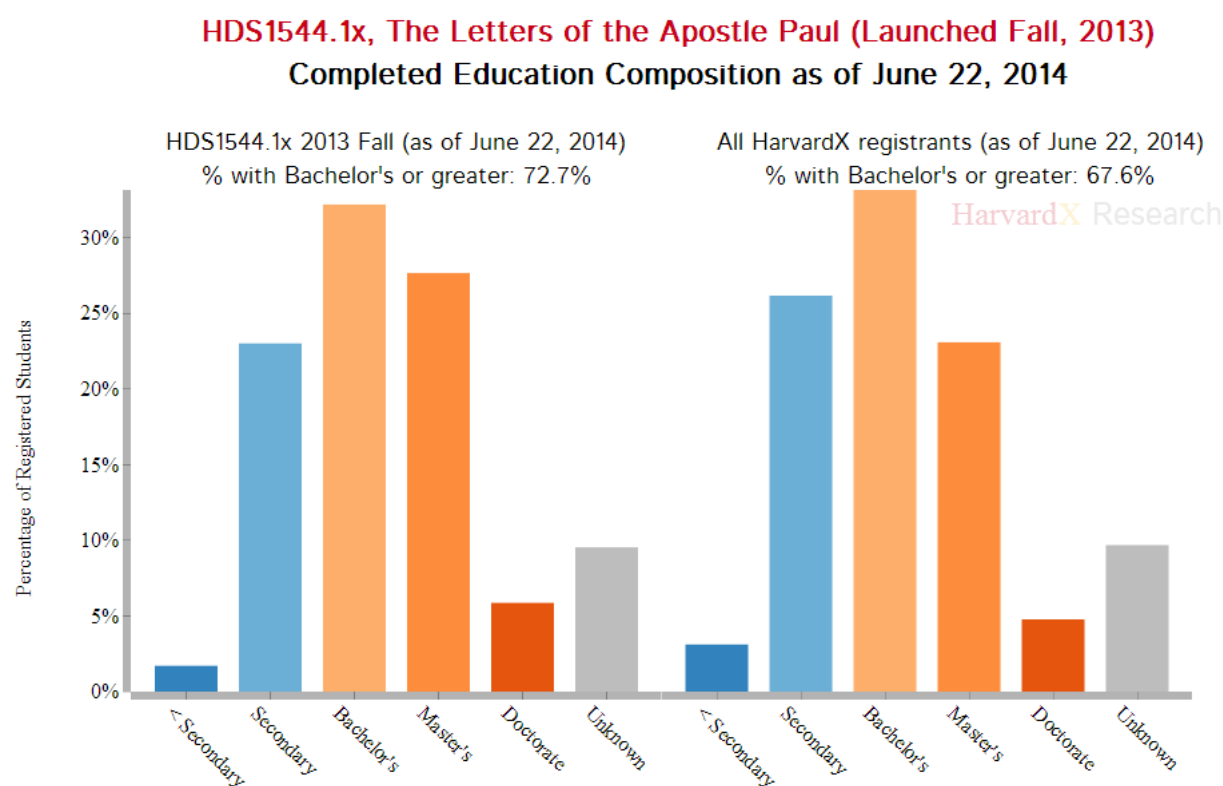Gender Composition as of June 22, 2014

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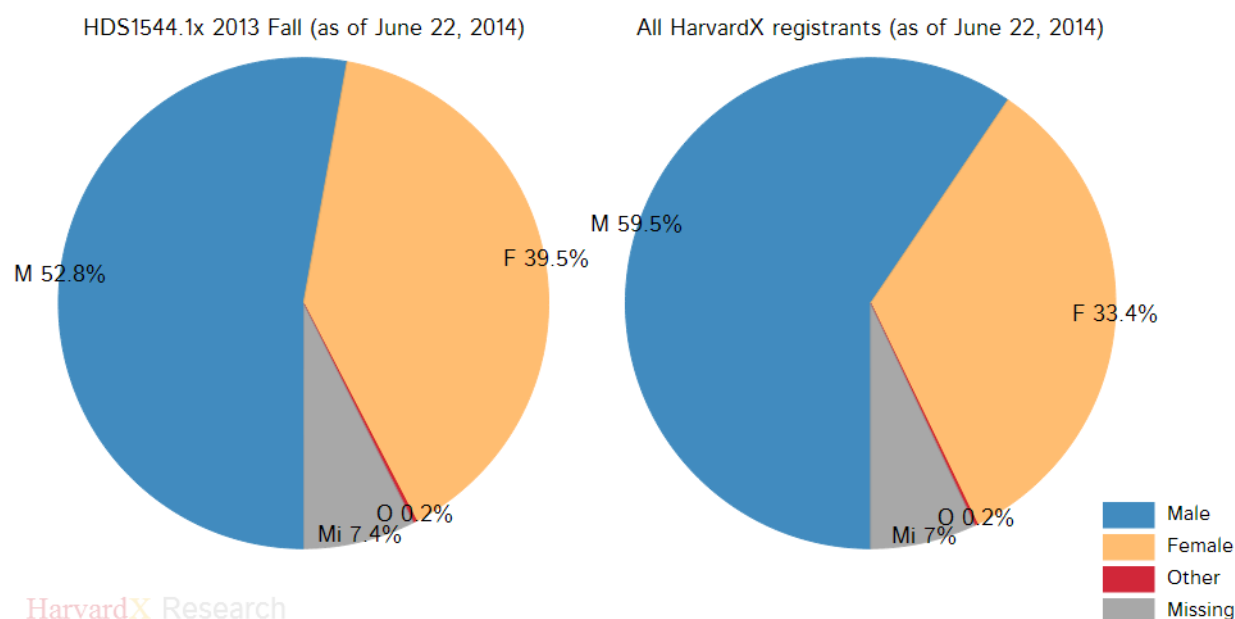
[13] S. O. Nesterkos, D. T. Seaton, K. Kashin, Q. Han, J. Reich, I. Chuang, and A. D. Ho., Gender Composition (HarvardX Insights, 2014). http://harvardx.harvard.edu/harvardx-insights/gender-composition.
[14] Ibid. Regarding the worldwide gender composition of registrants, of countries with at least 100 registrants, Spain had the most equal registration, with 50.1% female, 49.9% male, and 0% other registrants, while Ghana had the least gender parity, with 11.9% female, 88.1% male, and 0% other registrants. Indonesia, Romania, Poland, Greece, Portugal, Ukraine, Russia, and Argentina all had a higher percentage of female registrants than male.

D. Education and Enrollment

The participants in HarvardX courses are, on the whole, highly educated; 61.4% of all registrants hold a bachelor's degree or higher.[15] This percentage was even higher for the Letters of PaulX; 65.7% of registrants hold a bachelor's degree or higher.[16] 5.8% of students in the Letters of PaulX hold doctoral degrees, compared with 1.7% of students who have a less than secondary level of education.[17]

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
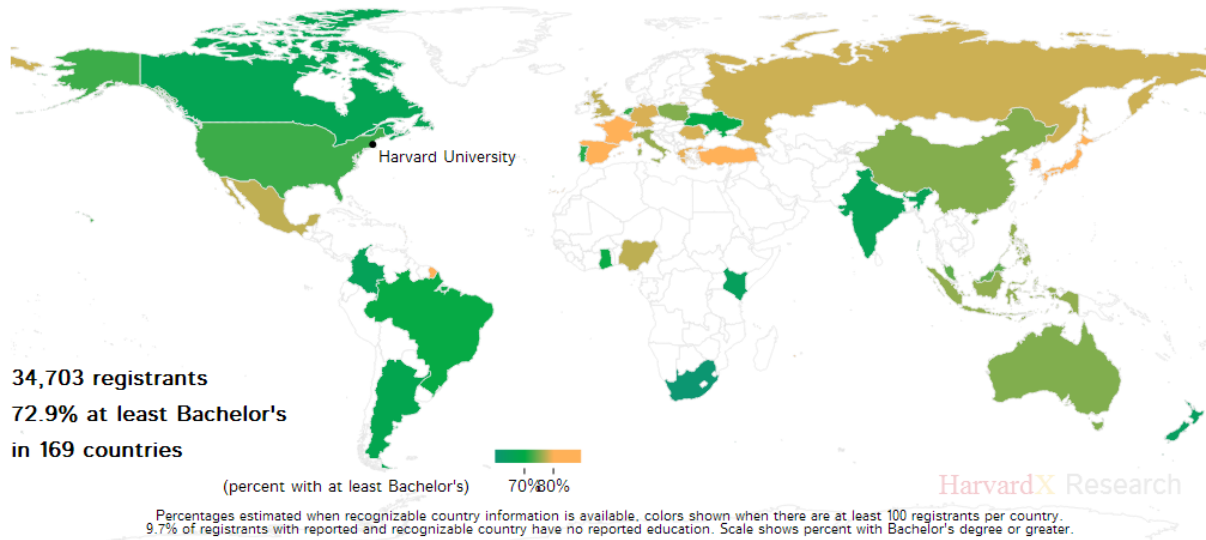Completed Education Composition as of June 22, 2014

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[15] S. O. Nesterkos, D. T. Seaton, K. Kashin, Q. Han, J. Reich, I. Chuang, and A. D. Ho., Education Levels Composition (HarvardX Insights, 2014). http://harvardx.harvard.edu/harvardx-insights/education-levels-composition.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

Of worldwide registrants reporting their education, South Africa had the lowest percentage of students holding a bachelor's degree or higher, at 59.1%.[18] France had the highest percentage of students holding a bachelor's degree or higher, at 88.9%.[19]

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
Estimated Worldwide Completed Education Level as of June 22, 2014

Harvard University

34,703 registrants
72.9% at least Bachelor's
in 169 countries

(percent with at least Bachelor's)   70%80%

HarvardX Research

Percentages estimated when recognizable country information is available, colors shown when there are at least 100 registrants per country.
9.7% of registrants with reported and recognizable country have no reported education. Scale shows percent with Bachelor's degree or greater.
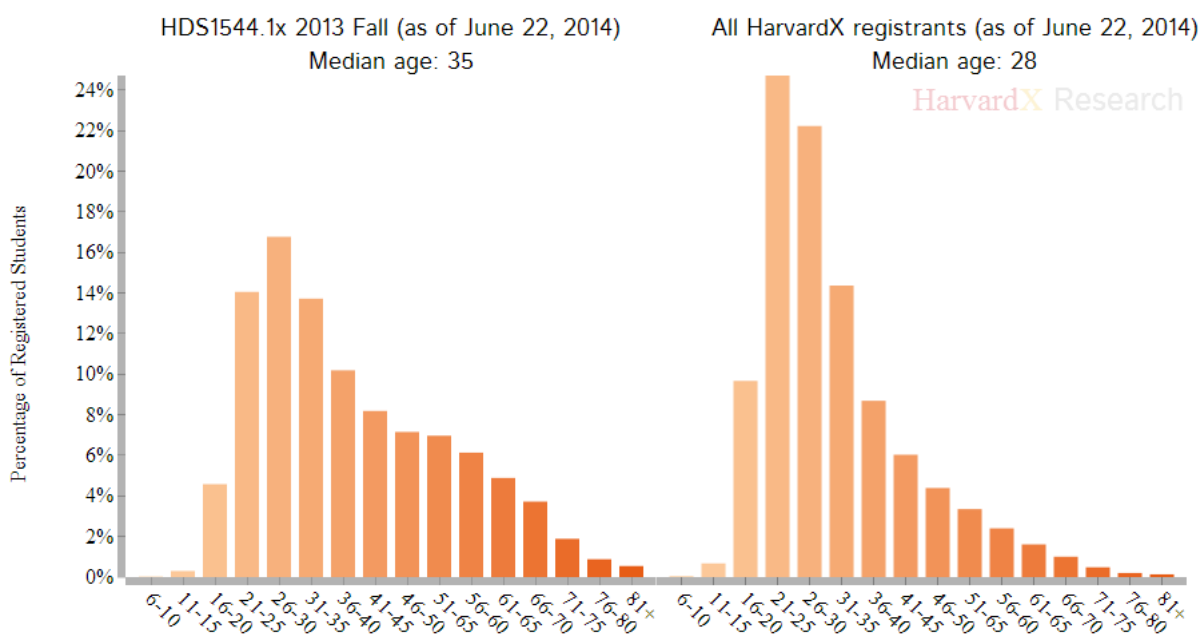
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[18] S. O. Nesterkos, D. T. Seaton, K. Kashin, Q. Han, J. Reich, I. Chuang, and A. D. Ho., Education Levels Composition (HarvardX Insights, 2014). http://harvardx.harvard.edu/harvardx-insights/education-levels-composition.
[19] Ibid. A full 7.8% of registrants from France held doctoral degrees.

E. Age and Enrollment

The registrants for the Letters of PaulX were older than the median HarvardX student. The median age for all HarvardX courses is 28, while the median for the Letters of PaulX was 35.[20] There were significantly more elderly students for this course than for the typical HarvardX course. For the age categories of 71-75, 76-80, and 81+, the number of registrants for the Letters of PaulX represent more than 10% of total registrants in those age categories for all HarvardX courses that have been offered combined.[21] For worldwide registrants, the United States had the highest median age, at 41, while India had the lowest median age, at 24.

HDS1544.1x, The Letters of the Apostle Paul (Launched Fall, 2013)
Age Composition as of June 22, 2014

F. Participation and Activity in Letters of PaulX

2,748 students took an end-of-course survey about their learning experience. Of these, 1,616 answered a question about how much of the course materials they completed. The average amount of course materials completed from this particular sampling of students was 72.57%.[22]

For active participants in the course, the Letters of PaulX seems to have been a significant intellectual and time commitment. 86% of students at the end of the course reported that the Letters of PaulX had been a moderate, high, or very high priority in their lives over the running time of the course. Students spent an average of 6.96 hours per week working on the course, with the average greatest number of hours spent in any particular course week being 8.85.[23] On the discussion threads at the end of the course, one common suggestion was to have the course material spread out over a longer term. Some students reported taking time away from family and other commitments to keep up with the pace of the course, while others felt they quickly fell behind their fellow classmates.

80% of respondents to the end-of-course survey reported feeling somewhat, very, or extremely connected to the community of learners and instructors for the course, while 85% felt that the teaching team was somewhat, very, or extremely accessible.[24]

On a more qualitative note, some "super-users" of the various course venues, particularly the discussion thread, regularly engaged with one another, and even reached out to one another at the end of the course. One example [*sic*] follows:[25]

> *As lessons went by I found myself doing more research in internet on the subject then I would have expected at the beginning and in the end a new knowledge came to me and made me appreciate more and more the assignements and the discussion treads, even if I dont know why by the time I finished reading my assignements ,all where full of posts and coments and I mostly restricted myself to comments on somebody also posts . How did they do it I don't know but my compliments to l****** - A********* - A*********** and all others who supplied me with a lot of information.*

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[22] HDS1544X End of Course Survey, Qualtrics, 2014.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] This post and others redact specific user names for privacy, but otherwise makes no editorial changes, so there are no spelling or grammatical corrections.

Many students reported having in-person meetings with other students in the course. 40% of respondents completed the course or used some of its materials in face-to-face meetings with others. From informal conversations with friends and family, to formal local meet-ups, to church and other faith community groups, a significant number of students embodied the collaborative value of the teaching team by finding in-person communities with which to learn. Two typical responses follow:

Response 1

There were so many in the class, so many ideas and points of views. We had a local group of ten who took the class and are still meeting to discuss the readings. I would have like to be placed in a group of ten from around the world. I think it would have been useful for me to have a specific group to respond to.

Response 2

I talked my church bible study group into doing it, so we'd meet once per week for further discussion.

Lastly, 88% of respondents felt the Letters of PaulX was the appropriate level of difficulty, with 7% finding the material too easy, and just 5% finding the material too challenging.

8. Learning in Letters of PaulX

2,748 students took an end-of-course survey about their learning experience. Some of the questions on the survey asked students to respond about their learning. When asked how much students had learned in the course, 83% reported learning "a fair amount" or "a great deal." Only 4% of students reported learning little or nothing from the course.[26] 66% of students said that the learning experience was "better" or "much better" than others they had had, 24% said that the experience was "about the same," and 10% said the experience was "worse" or "much worse."

Students were asked to rank from which aspects of the course they learned the most. Options included videos, readings, assessments, and discussions. A table of student responses follows:

#	Answer	1	2	3	4	Total Responses
1	Videos	995	307	58	34	1,394
2	Readings	327	899	132	36	1,394
3	Assessments	22	56	703	613	1,394
4	Discussion Forums	50	132	501	711	1,394
	Total	1394	1394	1394	1394	

Students were also asked open-response questions, including one soliciting what were the most intellectually transformative parts of the course. The responses aligned well with the stated learning goals of the course, and students largely responded that learning about the historical, political, and literary context of the letters of Paul were the most intellectually transforming, often citing specific lessons, concepts, and course content. Not atypically, one student writes:

> *The lessons about historical, social and religious context were transforming. Learning about letter writing helped me to understand the purpose of the prescript and letter format, which had always confused me. Finally and perhaps most importantly lesson 11 on wisdom, knowledge and prophecy has given me insights that are still developing and may still develop for some time to come, for me.*

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[26] HDS1544X End of Course Survey

Other students also reported being transformed by the material culture aspects of the course; again, many mentioned specific sites, images, and concepts. Some students were even inspired to do additional research outside of the bounds of the course! One student writes:

> *Household Management discussion / Aristotle. Considering the veiled women section in Corinthians. Walking out here to read L. Nasrallah's article on Thessalonike and understanding the apse mosaics. (Empire and Apocalypse). Great article!*

Still other students responded that particular aspects of course content were most transformative. There were frequent positive responses to the lecture videos, doctoral student discussion videos, and the videos with Dr. AnneMarie Luijendijk and Rev. John Stendahl. One student writes:

> *I loved John Stendahl's reading of Krister Stendahl's lecture on "Why I Love the Bible." That lecture left me thinking and talking about the topics he raised for a couple of weeks and I could probably talk about it today too!*

Many students reported being most transformed by interactions and conversation with fellow students. Students found interactions with one another to be both challenging and intellectually productive. Two typical responses follow:

Response 1

> *I was challenged to think and respond outside of my comfort zone. Although the insight of many of my fellow students often left me feeling like I was in over my head, I thoroughly enjoyed looking at something I thought I've always known in a new and interesting way.*

Response 2

> *I was transformed by the discussions being so civil that it made my real life discussion also very civil and fruitful.*

Lastly, many students reflected on their learning about taking responsibility for their interpretations, and quite a few reported feeling better equipped to read the Bible. Two particularly reflective responses follow:

Response 1

> *As an atheist enrolling in a course offered through a divinity school, I was understandably nervous about what I was getting myself into. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised to see that the materials were presented in such a scholarly way. I expected to be told what Paul's letters meant from a theological standpoint; instead I learned how to read Paul's letters. Having an*

understanding the social/cultural/historical context is crucial for reading these ancient texts and now I have the tools to decipher them on my own.

Response 2

This course has helped me to do something different: to look at the texts themselves and notice the subtleties of language and vocabulary, read what I can of the history and social setting, and trust that these all of these things matter.

Going forward, the experience of this course encourages me to do a couple of things:

Read more slowly. I read and/or hear these texts all the time. I read one verse knowing the verse that comes next, which is to say that I am not paying close attention anymore. To do the work in this course, I had to read slowly and with a beginner's ear.

Read the whole letter more often. The lectionary snippets are fine, but they are read out of context. Context matters: literary, social and political.

Take guesses. All anyone has is the nutmeg grater:[27] everyone is guessing. Some guesses are better informed than others, BUT some guesses that now pass as certain knowledge were not good guesses at all. Junia will always remind me of that.

Check the data. More than once in this course I presumed my response to the Discussion Question would go in one direction, only to find that the data I could gather did not point in that direction at all.

Pay attention to what I feel when I read. I was taught to do that in my first scripture courses, but one forgets and gets busy and opens the commentary too soon.

Finally, there are those wonderful Bibliographies at the end of each Day's lesson. I originally planned to audit this course – just listen in – in the hopes that I would be able to figure out what folks are saying about Paul today, in 2014. By Day 1 or 2 I had changed my mind and decided to do the work. What a good decision. Seldom does it happen that the rewards are commensurate with the work, but that was the case in this course. I attribute that to careful planning in the course design. Bravo course designers! By the time we were mid-way through, I knew that if I put the time and effort in to the exercise, I would learn something. In fact, I learned a lot. AND I have these wonderful bibliographies to explore.

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[27] In a Day 2 lecture, Dr. Nasrallah quoted Carolyn Steedman on archives, saying, "Your craft is to conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater." Carolyn Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust," The American Historical Review 106, no. 4 (October 2001): 1165.

8. Teaching Team Reflections

We include some samples of reflections, written shortly after the completion of the course, from doctoral candidates who served as the teaching team for the course in the hopes that they will prove useful to others thinking about launching such online ventures.

A. Teaching Fellow Reflection #1

On the whole, I found the experience of serving as a Teaching Fellow for a HarvardX course to be an incredibly valuable experience. Not only did it give me an opportunity to interact directly with hundreds of students across the world, it also afforded me a behind-the-scenes view into the much-hyped "cutting edge" of higher education. I am particularly grateful for the practical skills gained by working across various platforms and collaborating with a diverse team in the production and implementation of the course. I learned a lot.

This overall positive experience was, however, marked by a number of frustrations— some more easily addressed than others. While I think we, the teaching team, knew that the Letters of Paul would be a particularly difficult subject matter to address in a MOOC, I believe that we nevertheless underestimated just how difficult it would be to productively moderate an open online discussion on this topic. We were lucky that the student discussions very rarely veered into overtly disrespectful territory, but there were a small handful of students with particular axes to grind who ended up holding an outsized places in the conversation.

The mere existence of these voices, it must be noted, was not so much the problem as our inability to curb them. Frankly, we were hamstrung by the profound inadequacies of the edX discussion board. It needs substantial improvement, if not an entire overhaul, and it needs this improvement immediately. Perhaps the greatest disappointment of the entire experiment was edX's evident lack of interest in this technology, far and away the most crucial module for a humanities MOOC. As it stands, it could perhaps be useful for discussion groups of 100 participants or less. But for a course such as ours, the traffic made it virtually impossible for any real, substantive discussion to occur. Monologues reigned; response threads grew unwieldy almost immediately. Among the most crucially lacking features in the current version of the platform are:

> - The ability to delete individual responses. In the current format, if a response is "flagged" as inappropriate, the only way to remove this comment is to delete the entire thread. This renders the "flagging" feature effectively useless.

> - The ability for nested responses to responses. In the current format, replies can only be made "two deep" (on the level of a reply to a reply to the initial post), which made it impossible for further conversations to continue after an initial comment.

       - The ability for users to locate their own posts and/or be "tagged" in posts. In the current format, users could only see what threads they had posted in. In order to locate a previous post, they would have to comb through (literally) hundreds of other responses in a thread to locate their own. This meant, most importantly, that users were highly unlikely to see the Teaching Fellows' responses to their comments.

The inadequacy of the discussion board forced us to rely more heavily on Facebook and Poetry Genius for student interaction, both imperfect but far more productive platforms for substantive discussion. If edX aims to produce successful humanities MOOC's in the future, the discussion board must be improved immediately.

A further difficulty created, at least in part, by the edX platform was the unrealistic expectations fostered by the "certification" system. It was embarrassing, and on some occasions truly heartbreaking, to see how many students believed that the teaching staff was personally tracking each student's progress. Even though we made it very clear at the outset that certification was based on self-reported progress, a great number of students nevertheless believed that they were being personally monitored by Harvard faculty and teaching fellows. In all cases, it seemed that the existence of the "certificate" system stoked these expectations. Perhaps in the future edX should consider allowing individual professors to opt-out of the "certificate" program for their courses. In a course such as ours in which any true "assessment" was impossible, I believe it was, at best, inadvertently irresponsible to pretend to "certify" anything about a student's participation—at worst, it was an empty marketing ploy that cultivated false hopes in among the students.

B. Teaching Fellow Reflection #2

One of the things about which I was most curious coming into the course was the level of civility of student discourse. Online fora so often are marked by vitriol, but the discussions that took place for the course were largely respectful and showed forth a desire to learn together. Students often stated points of disagreement while acknowledging how they learned from the other perspectives brought into the course conversation. Being a biblical studies course, there was an incredible range of interest and investment in the materials, from confessional readings of the texts as sacred to significant familiarity without religious adherence to the texts to relative ignorance and desire to learn more about Paul and early Christianity. This incredible scope, which might easily have been a pitfall, turned out to invite extraordinary conversations about the values that underlie our readings and processes of making meaning from important texts and materials. I believe the discursive expectations of the classroom, even apparently an online environment, and the ethos Prof. Nasrallah and the teaching team strove explicitly to cultivate contributed to this civil discourse.

Even so, a few students could at times be combative. One particular student sought to engage in the same debate over the dating of materials almost every day of course material. When given attention, the student would be effusive with praise for the professor, even in disagreement, but would eventually ramp back up, trying to provoke

the same argument to the point it would become distracting. I bring this up when reflecting back on the course because I sometimes wondered if there might be a gendered element to this argumentative attitude. There were times the student's posts would take on a tone that I am not sure would have been directed toward a man, perhaps especially toward a man conveying information as fact, rather than Prof. Nasrallah's approach in highlighting both what scholars can know with some level of certainly and just as importantly what is up for debate. Feminists have long been attentive to the ways classrooms and epistemological authority is gendered, and while there were not necessarily explicitly sexist remarks made in this course, the course did raise my own attentiveness to such issues in online classrooms. I am not sure how HarvardX and edX might evaluate issues of gender (and we would do well to add race, class, etc.), but I would certainly encourage an intentional and critical consciousness. In summary, the experience of being part of the teaching team for this course was an extraordinary one.

I was amazed by the ways people from such diverse backgrounds learned together, and I do think many of them learned a great deal from Prof. Nasrallah and the teaching team and, just as importantly, from their interactions with diverse others. There is great potential in online education as a way not just of conveying information but cultivating high levels of civil discourse about matters of deep importance, while there are also challenges about how most effectively to facilitate such collaborative learning, if indeed this is the desire, which this course has demonstrated for me that it can and should be.

C. Teaching Fellow Reflection #3

One of the many benefits I gained from my experience of the Letters of PaulX course as a teaching team member is that its new online format led me to reflect on every part of teaching and learning in a fresh and critical way. As someone who has been educated in a traditional classroom format for many years, the entire process of redesigning the course for the blended and digital formats of HarvardX has opened a window for a rethink of what teaching and learning are about and how a course should be experienced by instructors and students alike. As a whole, this rethink has been undertaken as part of a larger move to teaching as a team sport, where the teaching team members partner with instructional designers, media specialists, and librarians to design the learning experience. In every step to create the course, we the team members kept asking ourselves what are the intended learning goals of particular activities or materials and what are the most effective ways to arrange them to achieve such goals. Also, once the course was launched, the teaching team kept paying careful attention to the learning curves and feedbacks from students behind their computer screens and trying to make ourselves as available to them as possible beyond the physical distance and time.

Overall the current edX platform, which was primarily designed for the subjects in the field of science and engineering, had room for improvement to facilitate discussion-based courses in humanities. On the technical side, the official course site simply could not handle the unprecedented traffic volume coming from student participations in the first couple of weeks. Additional functions for the discussion board would be also needed for better communications among users (e.g., easier way to track down one's

own comments). On the logistical side, more manpower in the teaching team would be desirable to engage in conversations with students more extensively given the current enrollment levels.

D. Teaching Fellow Reflection #4

I found the experience of working on the development, implementation, and teaching the Letters of PaulX to be full of tremendous highs and very deep lows, but overall the experience has been invaluable not only for the professional benefits for a CV and teaching resume, but for the opportunities for creativity and reflection as a developing teacher and scholar.

As someone committed to the democratic, liberative potential of education and to fostering collaboration in my future classrooms, the idea of a biblical studies MOOC was particularly exciting. Could open, challenging, respectful, and fully inclusive dialogue happen when more than 30,000 students came together to read the letters of Paul? The answer was simultaneously a resounding yes and a deeply disappointing no. On the one hand, I was blown away by the eagerness with which many students engaged. Witnessing friendly, intellectually generative communication between an atheist and an evangelical Christian over the internet gives me great hope not only for the genre of MOOCs but for the potential future of biblical studies fostering better, less harmful public discourse. Watching students critically think with scholarly and pastoral voices about canon formation was exciting; students from all over the globe were able to read the ancient and scholarly materials, understand the perspectives, and really get the complexity of the questions asked. On the other hand, a quick glance at the course statistics and for those of HarvardX overall are a sober reminder that our conversations, no matter how much we as a teaching team tried to foster inclusivity, access, and collaboration, still remain deeply gendered and classed. Sometimes, I was just surprised by what students understood or didn't. The so-called New Perspective on Paul (which, now 40 years old, hardly can be called new anymore), was shockingly new to our students. Students quickly reverted to engrained, Christianizing ways of writing, speaking, and thinking about Paul when presented with topics and other authors from Second Temple Judaism.

The development of the Letters of PaulX course provided some of the most intellectually exciting conversations of my still very new career. In the mini-seminar before the course launched and the frequent teaching team meetings, Dr. Nasrallah urged us to consider what kinds of classrooms we wanted to create. The MOOC genre sometimes seemed to open up tremendous collaborative and pedagogical potential, but it often caused tremendous difficulties. On the whole, I think the opportunities to work with Poetry Genius and to develop the Timemap were exciting and helpful for many students, but they could have been stronger.

I was most disappointed in the range of functionalities available to the teaching team through the edX platform. Faculty who create scholarship and foster ground-breaking conversation about pedagogy in biblical studies is one of the great strengths of Harvard Divinity School's program. We were dreaming big as faculty and teaching team when we

imagined ways to engage students in collaborative, non-banking model educational moments. It felt as though at every turn, we were told "no" or "edX can't/won't do that."

If I could point to one specific (and relatively easy fix) for future iterations of this course (or any other HarvardX course), it would be the development of a pop-up notebook tab. An enormous number of our students worked collaboratively, forming church groups, meeting at cafes, talking with family members. The edX platform had absolutely no forum in which students could take notes, journal, reflect on videos or discussions in a way which could be easily shared with others outside of the discussion threads. edX needs a way for students to keep, save, and share their work. Whether it's a formal portfolio system (my dream for MOOC humanities assessment), or a simple pop-up notebook, students need this opportunity to create their own work and to save it for future use.

Lastly, the entire edX platform seems designed for, by, and in conjunction with STEM disciplines. From the forced multiple-choice format of the assessment tool to the extreme shortcomings of the discussion threads, it sometimes felts as though we in biblical studies were speaking Greek to those who speak code, and vice versa. Such frustrations, however, have only demonstrated for me the importance of humanities faculty, and particular faculty in the study of religion, continuing to engage not only with HarvardX or even edX, but in all venues of MOOC and other online education, because we have something important to add to the conversation, especially about pedagogy. More feminist, postcolonial, and queer scholars need to be engaged, asking critical questions, and pushing the genre forward. Why, at the end of the day, do I still think this after the technical frustrations and with looming but vague uncertainty about the future use of MOOCs in higher education? Because 30,000 people from all over the world wanted to learn about the letters of Paul.

10. The Future of Letters of PaulX

The materials for this course module continue to live on at **lettersofpaul.org**. We encourage others to use the time-maps and any videos, with citation and reference to our webpage.

Appendix A:
Mini-seminar: Ethics and Online Education

Session 1: 11 May, 2013, *Bergama, Turkey*
> I recommend that you read "An Open Letter to Professor Michael Sandel from the Philosophy Department at San José State University" and the letter from Michael Sandel:
> http://chronicle.com/article/The-Document-an-Open-Letter/138937/
>
> The larger conversation should include three parts: 1) using technology in the classroom, including the "flipped" classroom in which students listen to professors lecture as part of the homework, and come into the classroom to interact with the professor further; 2) open access issues; 3) MOOCs.

Session 2: 6 June, 2013, 3-4pm, *Algiers Café, Cambridge*
> Barber et al., "An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead"
> http://www.ippr.org/images/media/files/publication/2013/04/avalanche-is-coming_Mar2013_10432.pdf
>
> Please think about the frameworks and rhetoric of this document, and consider its source(s). For your own future work, consider: What kind of classroom do I want to create? What's my ideal situation in 10 years?

Session 3: 17 July, 2013, 7pm, *Dr. Nasrallah's Home*
> chapters 1-3 of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
> *http://www.users.humboldt.edu/jwpowell/edreformFriere_pedagogy.pdf*
>
> Please think about the frameworks and rhetoric of this document, and consider its source(s). For your own future work, consider: What kind of classroom do I want to create? What's my ideal situation in 10 years?

Session 4: 12 August, 2013, *Algiers Café, Cambridge*
> Christopher Connell, "The Future of Education? As the world gets a taste of Princeton, Princeton gets ideas to improve at home," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*
> http://paw.princeton.edu/issues/2013/05/15/pages/5701/index.xml
> Jonathan Rees, "Harvard hates you (and Coursera isn't that fond of you either)," More or Less Bunk Blog
> http://moreorlessbunk.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/harvard-hates-you-and-coursera-isnt-all-that-fond-of-you-either/
> J. Rees, "Stephen Greenblatt will not take questions," More or Less Bunk Blog
> http://moreorlessbunk.wordpress.com/2013/05/22/stephen-greenblatt-will-not-take-questions/
> Nathan Heller, "Laptop U: Has the Future of College Moved Online?" *The New Yorker*
> http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/05/20/130520fa_fact_heller

Appendix B:
Letters of PaulX Syllabus

HDS 1544x.1-3
The Letters of the Apostle Paul

There is no Christ outside Saint Paul. Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 2.

Teaching Staff:
Dr. Laura Nasrallah, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, Harvard Divinity School/Committee on the Study of Religion, Harvard University
Jennifer Quigley, doctoral candidate, New Testament and Early Christianity, Harvard University: The Divinity School
J. Gregory Given, doctoral candidate, New Testament and Early Christianity, Harvard University: Committee on the Study of Religion
Chan Sok Park, doctoral candidate, New Testament and Early Christianity, Harvard University: The Divinity School
Tyler Schwaller, doctoral candidate, New Testament and Early Christianity, Harvard University: The Divinity School

Course description:
The letters of Paul are the earliest texts in the Christian scriptures, written by a Jew at a time when the word "Christian" hadn't yet been coined. What is the religious and political context into which they emerged? How were they first interpreted? How and why do they make such an enormous impact in Christian communities and in politics today?

Archaeological materials and ancient writings will help you to enter the ancient Mediterranean world and to think about religious groups, power, poverty, health, and the lives of elites and slaves in the Roman Empire. We'll explore how controversial and important these letters were in the ancient world and for understanding the ancient world. We'll also spend some time thinking about how these letters still make a tremendous impact today.

Whether you've been studying Paul's letters for years or are merely curious about what Christian scriptures are, this course will provide you with information to deepen your understanding of the ancient contexts and present-day controversies about these texts.

Course Objectives
1. To investigate the Pauline correspondence as a record of struggle and debate over key social, political, ethical, and theological or religious issues.

2. To learn about the Roman Empire in which the Pauline correspondence was penned.

3. To come to your own understanding of what the Pauline correspondence reveals about first-century debates about key issues, and to take responsibility for your interpretations.

4. To engage ancient texts with *disciplined intimacy*, understanding that these texts are both strange to our world and intimate to it. This disciplined intimacy involves learning and practicing close reading, as well as placing texts within their social, political, cultural contexts.

Course Expectations:
This course will run for five weeks, from 6 January 2014 to 5 February 2014.

Participants seeking a certificate of completion should complete the course materials and assignments. This might include, but is not limited to, watching video lectures, reading texts, engaging in annotation assignments, and participating in discussion forums.

Students who cannot complete all of the course materials and assignments are welcome and encouraged to audit this class by engaging with the course materials to the extent that they can.

All content will be released by 12 PM Eastern Standard Time (EST) on the day indicated on the syllabus.

Readings:
All required readings for the course will be provided to you in edX as part of each day's material. Course readings will also be made available through a HarvardX collaboration with poetrygenius.com. Additional or extended readings will also be available on that website. Please complete the readings for the day before watching that day's videos, unless otherwise noted.

Questions:
All questions should be made on the FAQ Discussion Thread. We apologize, but given the possibility of many queries, emails or tweets sent directly to the course teaching staff will not be answered.

Syllabus of Readings

We recommend that you read the New Testament texts in the New Revised Standard Version (which will be provided for you). You may use any translation, but remember to check now and then to notice differences between your translation and the NRSV.

6 January 2014 Day 1: Welcome and Introduction
Letter to Philemon

8 January 2014 Day 2: What are the Letters of Paul?
Letter to Philemon (again)
The prescripts to Paul's letters

10 January 2014 Day 3: The Historical Context of Letter-Writing
Romans 16
"Letter from a boy" (*P. oxy.* 119)
Letter of Isias to Hephaistion

13 January 2014 Day 4: Rhetoric in the Ancient World. . . and Today
Galatians, especially 1:1-3:1
Romans 1:1-17
Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From Birmingham Jail*

15 January 2014 Day 5: Canon, Part I: What were some ancient responses to Paul's letters as scripture or authoritative?
1 Cor. 15:1-11; Galatians 1-2; Philippians 3; 2 Peter 3:15-16
Athanasius *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter*
Eusebius *History of the Church* 3.25.1-7
Wayne Meeks and John Fitzgerald, eds., *The Writings of St. Paul* (2d ed.; New York: Norton, 2007) 228-235, 285. © This includes:
"Ascents of James" (Epiphanius, *Pan. haer.* 30.16.6-9)
The Cerinthians (ibid., 28.5.1-3)
"Letter of Peter to James" (*Kerygmata Petrou* selections)
Selections of *Clementine Recognitions*
Irenaeus *Against the heresies* 1.41.1 on Marcion (p. 285)

17 January 2014 Day 6: Canon, Part 2: What are some modern responses to Paul's letters as scripture or authoritative?
1 Cor. 7:12; 1 Cor. 7:25
Howard Thurman, interview (read response to the first question)
Stendahl, Why I Love the Bible, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*
A New New Testament."Forward" by John Dominic Crossan
A New New Testament. "Introducing *A New New Testament*" by Hal Taussig
F. F. Bruce, "Tradition and the Canon of Scripture," 59, 69-74 (in *The Authoritative Word*)

20 January 2014 Day 7: A Succession of Empires and Roman Imperial Power
Polybius *Histories* Book 1.1.2-2.8 and 1.4.1-11.
Daniel 2
1 Corinthians 10-12

22 January 2014 Day 8: Roman Imperialism and Jewish Diversity
Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.119-166; 2.254-270
Josephus *Antiquities* 18.1

24 January 2014 Office Hours

27 January 2014 Day 9: The Roman Empire: Politics and Religion
"Letter of Paulus Fabius Maximus and Decrees by Asians Concerning the Provincial Calendar," in Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1982) reading 33 (pp. 215-224; Priene inscription)
Tacitus, *Histories* 4.81 and John 9:1-13
1 Corinthians 1-4
Romans 13

29 January 2014 Day 10: Introduction to 1 Corinthians and Slavery and Freedom in Roman Corinth
1 and 2 Corinthians
Aristotle, *Politics* I.1-13 (1252a-1260b)
Justinian *Digest* 21

31 January 2014 Day 11: Wisdom, Prophecy, Knowledge in 1 Corinthians
1 Corinthians
Galatians 3-4
2 Corinthians 10-12
The Wisdom of Solomon

3 February 2014 Day 12: Early Christian Communities Interpret 1 Corinthians
1 Corinthians
Aristotle, *Politics* I.1-13 (1252a-1260b)
1 Timothy (esp. chapters 2-3), Colossians 2:20-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-6:20
Acts of Paul and Thecla
Tertullian *On baptism* 17

5 February 2014 Day 13: Conclusion