

## **Going Deeper: A Reflection on Educational Cornerstones and Adaptations in Changing Landscapes of Practice**

**Dorothee E. Tripodi\***

Practice self-care, be resilient, be kind and empathetic with your students and with yourself, adapt your educational practices, navigate realistic expectations, fulfill degree requirements, and provide flexible learning platforms!<sup>1</sup> Prepare interns for bi-vocational ministry complexities in a landscape of declining denominations and nonprofit agencies with limited socioeconomic resources. This type of advice, often presented to faculty, highlights the contextual educational needs of field educators, interns, and supervisor mentors as they try to analyze, identify, and address adaptive needs in context while coping with post-COVID realities such as online learning fatigue, blended in-person and virtual communities, and rapid cultural changes always available through technology that allows global access.

What, then, are the cornerstones and adaptations in the changing landscapes of practice? How do we as instructors adapt to a post-COVID world, reenvisioned degree program requirements, multiple technological platforms, the integration of artificial intelligence,<sup>2</sup> and cultural demands that require flexibility and access to instruction on an individual basis yet create ongoing communal learning?

As a field educator and instructor, I began this process by acknowledging these realities and how an instructor's first step is to research and acknowledge these realities and analyze them through the lens of student needs. Such an initial response to an adaptive process of reimagining education allowed me to take the macro-level trends and apply them to my micro-cosmos, which includes international interns whose global perspective and practices add to the diversity and richness of reflection while reexamining practices in local contexts. As a second step, I reevaluated the assignments in light of learning objectives and intern experiences to preserve creativity, innovation, and communal learning. Rather than reducing the learning outcomes and goals to a checklist, a great temptation when one is fatigued, I streamlined them. I focused on the cornerstones of field education, theological reflection, and integration.

Like the wisdom of the saints or elders, theological reflection and integration continue to be the cornerstone of field education and vocational ministry. Instructors, interns, and supervisor-mentors interpret Scripture or sacred texts and integrate theological and ethical practices in a community informed by social sciences and other academic disciplines. Engaging in such practices deepens the understanding of vocational identity and provides development and self-awareness in systems caught up

\* Rev. Dorothee Tripodi DMin, Th.M. serves as Assistant Professor, Supervised Ministry and Director of Supervised Ministry and Vocational Planning at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond VA campus. Her email is [dtropodi@upsem.edu](mailto:dtropodi@upsem.edu)

in rapid change. What form the teaching of reflection and integration takes is the challenge that I, as an instructor, must address, since these forms require methodologies beyond knowledge-based traditional educational forms of ministerial practices.<sup>3</sup> The nones, dones, spiritual but not religious critique of denominational structures and institutions requires that I, as an instructor, enter into that space to invite creative unlearning and learning.

Perhaps I need to follow the advice of a supervisor-mentor who, while preaching at chapel, challenged us to “go deeper” in our learning, spiritual practices, community engagement, and service.<sup>4</sup> Here, going deeper does not mean increasing activity levels, checklists, or defining every learning activity in a mutual learning space. Instead, going deeper means returning to intentional spiritual practices and times of meditation and prayer, as well as a dialogue that acknowledges challenges and allows processing in community so common wisdom can emerge. We need to invite a dialogue on how to support each other and address existing needs in light of the overwhelming social challenges such as climate change, unraveling social support systems, creation care, radicalized religion, refugee resettlement, and migration issues in a highly polarized cultural environment that impacts denominational and agency cultures as well.

Here, our theological reflection together invites the presence of the divine and reminds us:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, nor are you free to abandon it.<sup>5</sup>

As such, theological reflection and integration move from the challenge of the context to a sacred understanding and implementation of practice. The question that I, as an instructor, raise is, “What is the common good God invites us to create? How do we participate in God’s loving presence and work where we are? What does that look like in your internship?” This invites reflection that allows for the questioning of current practices in light of the willingness to move away from the process of assessment and from unlearning to relearning. While arduous work, embodying such a process invites the possibility of paradigm change and shift, as Sung Hee Chang reminds us. Connecting theological and pedagogical reflective practice will “create a learning space where diverse self-directed learners are challenged to examine their practices and underlying assumptions.”<sup>6</sup>

The practice of theological reflection and integration empowers all. It protects marginalized voices and, as such, constitutes an important cornerstone of field education because it invites the ever-important assessment of self in vocation as part of an institutional system in the community. As Matthew Floding reminded us, “The point of theological reflection is that it helps you discover more of who you are; how precious and meaning-full Tradition is; and the joy of ministering to, with, and receiving from [those] you journey with.”<sup>7</sup>

Such reflections invite us into the space where multiple paths of moving forward emerge as part of the assessment and acknowledgment of living with the tension of the ideal core values and contextual realities that do not emphasize the common good. This assessment becomes an invitation to engage in compromises based on difficult conversations. There may even be a need to give up some favored practices for the common good. While these outcomes of theological reflection and integration are not new, we experience them as intensified due to the rapid cultural changes locally, nationally, and globally.

From a pedagogical perspective, I, as the instructor, must also reexamine my learning objectives and practices, adapting my practices in light of technological realities and hybrid learning that relies on the self-discipline of the instructor and intern while considering the connection between the academic work and the practice of ministry. Acknowledging the temptation to prepare a pedagogical checklist, I must redesign my “safe” and hopefully “brave” space of mutual learning. How do my assignments enhance vocational discernment and allow the intern to express creativity and leadership post-COVID and in light of current technology? Is a trigger warning or trauma-based behavior covenant enough for interns and instructors who believe in the ministry of presence and social healing? What does it mean to go deeper? As Henri Nouwen reminds us,

Communities as well as individuals suffer. All over the world there are large groups of people who are persecuted, mistreated, abused, and made victims of horrendous crimes. . . . In these suffering bodies we must be able to recognize the suffering Christ. . . . As we call on one another to respond to the cries of these people and work together for justice and peace, we are caring for Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Caring for Christ, caring for each other in learning environments whether online or onsite, requires a resilience of instructor, interns, and supervisor-mentors that is steeped in spiritual practices. More than ever, my inviting interns into spiritual practices as part of my class goes beyond a technical solution or teaching of skills. Engaging in spiritual practices such as the Ignatian spirituality practices,<sup>9</sup> Celtic prayers, and *lectio, visio, or musica divina* creates sacred space that can transcend educational platforms. These practices experienced as part of theological reflection complement contextual analysis and invite theological integration.

These practices also address the needs of online learners. Returning to St. Benedict’s Rule<sup>10</sup> as a life spiritual practice creates the structure needed for self-motivation as interns engage in online learning, Zoom social connections, or online spiritual formation groups. It brings such joy when students lead these exercises, not just as co-hosts but also as co-teachers in these environments. To embody God’s love, goodness, and hope, I must focus on my spiritual practices and connections with colleagues in a supportive community. Therapists, coaches, and spiritual directors I know are encouraging those of us who are field educators to be kind to ourselves in

light of rapid external and internal change and high levels of anxiety. These professionals are champions of mental health who are aware that instructors find themselves navigating mental health issues for interns or others at field education sites. I have integrated resources and guest speakers concerning trauma-informed ministry and engagement with neurodivergent persons and have explored creative ways to overcome social isolation.

Going deeper here means assessing current interaction practices as a source of needed stability and exploring further creative and innovative embodiment. Going deeper also means a return to those whose lives during complex, even oppressive times led to deeper biblical and theological understanding. If going deeper means that we reappropriate established practices, we need to unlearn some adaptations of current practices and reengage saints and elders who have passed on such wisdom. Their wisdom continues to sustain religious or spiritual communities during uncertain and oppressive times. Moreover, what is going deeper for me may be the first discovery of a practice for some interns. Therefore, I need to meet my interns in their spaces as we deepen our theological understanding. Together, we explore ethical and cultural premises and apply them to Scripture to seek wisdom in our context. Social science insights provide additional insights into the complexity of systems and individual contexts that perpetuate suffering. Call it social engagement or ministry of presence; it is where going deeper begins before God or in meditation and community. It is not easy work, but it is the work of going deeper, the work that from a liturgical perspective includes the importance of the sacraments. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "All Christian community exists between word and sacrament. It begins and ends in worship,"<sup>11</sup> and it exemplifies an inclusive community of care and service.

In the end, the reward for going deeper is hope in times of anxiety and trouble, not only from a religious but also from a humanitarian perspective, as Amanda Gorman suggests:

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew  
That even as we hurt, we hoped  
That even as we tired, we tried.<sup>12</sup>

And let the church universal attest once again to God's presence and love even in times of uncertainty, suffering, and oppression through love and service.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Amy Jen Su, “6 Ways Educators Can Weave Self-Care into Their Workday,” February 5, 2025, Harvard Business Publishing Education, <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/self-care-strategies-educators-workday>.

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Debelius, Joshua Kim, and Edward Maloney, eds., *Recentering Learning: Complexity, Resilience, and Adaptability in Higher Education* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2024), chap. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Annie Peshkam, “What New Educators Get Wrong about Teaching,” September 4, 2024, Harvard Business Publishing Education, <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/what-new-educators-get-wrong-about-teaching>.

<sup>4</sup> “Chapel—January 29—Richmond Campus,” January 29, 2025, Union Presbyterian Seminary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxjx0bhsDJs>.

<sup>5</sup> Lana Weinstein, “Repent, Repair, Renew,” August 31, 2023, Union for Reform Judaism, <https://urj.org/blog/repent-repair-renew>.

<sup>6</sup> Sung Hee Chang and Matthew Floding, *Enlighten: Formational Learning in Theological Field Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Floding, *Engage: A Theological Field Education Toolkit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 35. Floding is referring here to Christians, but I am expanding his statement to all who journey with us to include interfaith and secular contexts.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), July 19.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Fleming, “Pray with Your Imagination,” Ignatian Spirituality.com, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Tomaine, *The Rule of Benedict: Christian Monastic Wisdom for Daily Living* (Nashville, TN: Skylight Paths, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 233.

<sup>12</sup> Lian Parsons, “History Has Its Eyes on Us,” The Harvard Gazette, January 20, 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/01/amanda-gormans-inauguration-poem-the-hill-we-climb/>.