

## Reflections on Practices and Possibilities

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Online spiritual care and field education supervision aims at providing future religious leaders with the skills and personal insight needed to understand and empower individuals with whom they minister. In traditional settings, this task is usually accomplished through face-to-face encounters in the presence of a supervisor. In the examples outlined in the preceding essays, ministry supervisors are making use of digital technology to maintain the support, empowerment, and guidance of chaplains and other religious leaders near and far. The essays capture the pros and cons of online and distant learning and the stories share many common aspects.

It is generally agreed that remote chaplains or ministers-in-training benefit particularly from the combination of online didactic education and digital supervision. The advantages of digital formation and supervision are enormous and bridge geographic distance in an era in which the boundaries of classrooms are being constructed in the virtual sphere. Digital technology allows chaplains and ministry students to “attend” supervisory sessions at anytime from anywhere in the world that has Internet access, regardless of location or time-difference from anywhere. A major advantage of online education is that it allows students to access didactic materials 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

While I have not participated in any digitally-based clinical pastoral education (CPE), I did enroll in five online classes during my study at Hartford Seminary. The process was both enriching and convenient—but it was also frustrating. In order to read the professor's lecture, digest the required weekly readings, post my comments, read my colleagues' posts, and provide my own posting, I spent considerably more time than I would preparing for a traditional classroom. The frequent log-on and log-off process meant that students needed to invest additional time to refresh their memory of the previous posts of their colleagues and respond to their comments. Some class participants monopolized the discussion with very long postings in a way that would not be tolerated in traditional classroom. After completing five courses online, I still wondered if the online education process was worth the amount of money and time I spent. I had that online experience in mind as I read the accounts in this section about digital formation and supervision.

#### A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE BENEFITS OF DIGITAL SUPERVISION

This essay will discuss online didactics and the impact of the digital supervision process on chaplains or ministry students and their supervisors. As the technology continues to change rapidly, it becomes more user-friendly and in sync with the digital generation. What is at stake in the utilization of virtual meetings? Can ministry students and supervisors succeed using digital means in what was once an exclusively face-to-face traditional supervision setting? Can supervisors formed in a previous era adjust to the language and culture of the digital generation?

One constant theme in these essays is the endorsement of the digital supervision despite the major challenges the participants encountered. For example, Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) supervisor, Gary Sartain, faced the challenge of finding a secure platform to conduct online supervision, and ultimately adopted MegaMeeting, which provided the group with ample technological capabilities. In his case, the process yielded the results sought. The stress with the system was related to the absence of technical expertise at some centers or the necessary resolve to overcome the frustration that accompanies this new era.

One of the successful models was adopted by Martha Rutland. In her case, the use of combined face-to-face group instruction at the beginning and end of the program provided the group with the opportunity to break

the barriers of being strangers. Ongoing support between the two meetings was accomplished through follow-up telephone calls and emails. I was surprised to learn that the students had to initiate their first contact with their hospice patient by telephone while expecting the result to be intimate and empathetic. I still wonder if distant students would benefit more from arranging their field education supervision in a local facility, where they can conduct their clinical pastoral visit and then report on such visits utilizing distant-learning methods.

#### THE PERSON AT THE CENTER

The basic elements of supervisory success remain unchanged despite the increasingly diverse background of participants, the kind of classroom (virtual or traditional), or the type of technology used. The person remains at the center of the process and supervisors need to invest their time and efforts intentionally and authentically to replicate the benefits in peer-review of their clinical experiences.

First of all, traditional settings allow participants to witness closely the depth of the experience. In his article, Lee Beach acknowledged that online the analytical depth and length of peer comments varied from one participant to another. Second, online education is a great tool for non-native English-speaking students who lack the spoken-language proficiency, yet who might have strong writing skills that would make reading their online postings a pleasurable experience. Third, introverts, who might hide or otherwise require on-the-spot prompting, blossomed in online supervision by interacting without the pressure of the traditional supervisory setting that favors extraverts. Finally, technical difficulties were inevitable as some participants struggled with the limited bandwidth of their Internet connection, which meant slower performance for sound, video, and large graphics—it ultimately took too much time to download a presentation.

Digital technology is ever-changing and provides for various interactive possibilities that were unavailable a decade ago. Because the technology is changing so rapidly, it will be a financial challenge for some supervisory centers to keep up with the ever-changing software and equipment. This will be particularly difficult in places around the globe where the preparation of religious leaders occurs in contexts with limited economic resources. The overwhelming majority of current college graduates are technologically savvy, is able to navigate online very easily, and can adapt to new equip-

ment more quickly than it can be purchased. Do spiritual care departments have the funds and support staff needed to continually update the technology and train chaplains in its usage? Is it possible for an older pastoral supervisor or spiritual care supervisor, whose whole career has been spent in a traditional setting, to communicate well with students who speak a digital language and live in a virtual world?

It is my judgment that the failure to capture real-time emotions will eventually deprive chaplains of the generosity of active listening, offering empathy, or strengthening camaraderie. The greatest gift of listening is to open ourselves and provide an active listening environment based on the ability to be present in support of one another. Can future religious leaders engaged in remote learning fully experience the gift of empathetic listening? I also wonder to what degree the hospitality of being welcoming and open to a speaker is missing when supervisees are not in the physical presence of each other? To what degree does the virtual setting compromise the foundation of trust and the gift of vulnerability, an essential foundation for supervision and peer-review? A setting where chaplains can see multiple windows on the same screen, the impact will be different from a webinar where participants type their comments without the ability to see and speak simultaneously. Are participants aware of their own presence and the presence of others—and are they knowledgeable of any internal limits? Digital supervision of clinical experiences might capture the basic foundation of good supervision, yet it compromises the human element in tender moments of physical meeting. The virtual experience will ultimately fail in the face of grief and loss. At such times, the silence of the virtual supervision is deafening—it fails to be powerful compared to the silence of group peer-support at a time when silence is a sacred act of empowerment.