

Unexpected Challenges in Conducting CPE in Hong Kong 2013

Rodney W. Seeger

Summary

Supervising a CPE group one did not select in a cultural setting not one's own is rich with the challenges of diversity. Seeger discovered that the difference that created the most tension was not cultural but religious.

BACKGROUND

The Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program at Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital in Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong has been in existence for 15 years. Every other year, CPE supervisors from the United States are invited to conduct a unit of CPE in English—I was the visiting supervisor from America for the summer program in 2013.

From the beginning, there were several challenges: 1) I would be supervising in a different culture and a different hospital with expectations of spiritual care that were unknown to me; 2) I was supervising a group of students I had not interviewed, nor chosen, nor had they chosen me; 3) One of the students rejected what I was encouraging the students to learn, resisted the requirements of the CPE program of that hospital, and openly declared that what I was teaching wrong; and 4) Along the way I realized that I had not supervised a Level I unit of CPE since I had retired almost 10 years ago. So I was relieved to discover that the student handbook for Nethersole Hospital was familiar and similar to what I had included in my CPE programs. I did not anticipate, however, how complex and challenging the CPE program would become.

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2855

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THE CPE PROGRAM AT NETHERSOLE

There were three full-time CPE groups meeting, two of which were conducted in Cantonese. Although my group was conducted entirely in English, I discovered on the first day that the morning meeting everyday from 9:00–10:00 AM was conducted in Cantonese. The meeting included opening worship, led by a staff chaplain or a CPE student; exercise and stretching, again led by a staff chaplain or a CPE student; followed by a case presentation again led by a staff chaplain or a CPE student for the last 30 minutes of the hour. Only when the students in my CPE group were in charge of this morning routine (every Thursday) were the presentations mainly in English. The other days, the 9:00 AM meetings were all in Cantonese. It was clear that a solution was required. Two of the women in my group were very discouraged—one said she would have to quit if so much of the program was going to be conducted in Cantonese. Before the first day was over, one of the men in my English-speaking group agreed to do simultaneous interpretation at gatherings in which Cantonese was the language spoken. The first crisis of the summer was solved simply and quickly thanks to the compassion of one of the students.

MY CPE GROUP

The five students who were in my CPE group were all required to be fluent in English. Before I met the students on that first Monday of orientation, I only knew that there were three women and two men: one woman was from Korea, one from Malaysia, and one from Hong Kong; both men were from Hong Kong. I knew they were from 30- to 56-years old; three were married and two were single. Since I had not interviewed any of the students and of course they had not met me, getting acquainted became the first priority in building the group.

Beginning with the second day, Tuesday, of the first week of orientation the six of us sat in close proximity to each other at the morning meeting so the three primarily English-speaking people could hear the simultaneous translation. After this first session with the interpreter, we realized we had another problem to solve: the Cantonese students would be bothered by hearing our interpreter speaking out loud in the middle of the whole group. From then on, we sat off to one side and in the back row so we would minimize the interruption and disruption by our interpreter. We continued to

sit together in the back row on the far right for the remainder of the eleven weeks of the summer CPE program. A second crisis was averted.

On Friday and Saturday of the first week, there was an overnight retreat at a YMCA camp overlooking Tolo Harbor. The sole purpose of this retreat was for everyone to tell their life stories. I really liked the idea, because it fit right into my plan for us to become better acquainted. I had read a draft of the article by John L. Kater that appears in this issue of *Reflective Practice*.¹ He describes the challenges of teaching in Hong Kong because students tended not to share too much about themselves, especially parts of their history which might be embarrassing and/or hurtful to their family and its reputation. I wondered how the retreat would go.

Much to my surprise and delight everyone in this group was quite open in sharing about themselves. It did not seem to be any different than I had experienced when I was supervising CPE in the San Francisco Bay Area CPE centers. As we were planning for the overnight at the Y camp, the student from Korea, who is Seventh Day Adventist, indicated she could not go because that would interfere with her Sabbath observance. It was important for her to be with her husband and son in worship on the Sabbath; however, she volunteered to be the first one to tell her story if we could meet before departure to the camp.

I was very impressed and delighted with her sharing. She spoke openly and forthrightly about growing up as a pastor's daughter in Korea. She shared her challenges relating to her mother and her younger brother. When her father received an assignment outside of Korea, she persuaded her parents that she would go to a Seventh Day Adventist college on the east coast of the United States. She described how hard it was to be in the US all alone, yet she did not want to burden her parents so she told them all was well. Her sharing was surprisingly open and it occurred to me that she has been influenced by her time in the US related to self-disclosure and openness in sharing.

The remaining five of us, four students and me, went to the Y camp and continued the process of sharing our stories. Throughout that evening and into the next morning, I was positively impressed with the level of openness and sharing that occurred. I also shared my story. It seemed like a healthy sense of intimacy had been reached in this personal sharing. The next challenge would be to bring the Korean woman, who had not been part of this experience, up to speed.

From that point forward, when the six of us were in the CPE group room and the door was closed, what happened in that room felt very much like what I had experienced in CPE during those more than 30 years that I supervised in San Francisco. My fears were relieved.

WHAT MADE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN MY SUPERVISION OF STUDENTS?

An important preparation that aided my supervision of these students began many years ago. I worked in a Medical Center where there was a great diversity of ethnic, cultural, racial, socio-economic, religious, and sexual orientation among patients, staff, and students. Early in my career, I worked with nurse educators and social workers to help employees be more sensitive to this diversity among co-workers, patients, and their families. At first, the emphasis was on cultural competence and the awareness that all professionals need to be culturally competent. That focus shifted toward cultural humility toward others. By letting others teach us about themselves, by being respectful and curious, we learned from them how to be with and respond respectfully and sensitively to others.

Recently the focus has shifted again: our goal is to be culturally effective. How do we learn enough about ourselves and others so that we can relate and communicate respectfully and sensitively? It means that we are able to understand and relate to the fact that people are different. There is a way of learning about differences and not letting the differences be the reasons for discrimination against people who are not like us. It is important to be open, respectful, curious, and self-aware. My previous work on cultural sensitivity and awareness helped me be more effective in my communication with and relationship to my students, while supervising CPE in Hong Kong. With such a distinct cultural diversity present in the Hong Kong group, it is essential as a CPE supervisor to know how to understand the many factors of diversity, and how to respond to them and work with them as part of supervision.

Over the years I have supervised students from many Asian, European, and African countries, besides supervising CPE students from all walks of life, diverse religious traditions, and from most of the regions of the US. I have continued to expand and update my understanding of how to respond to and address diversity in order to supervise people more effectively. Along with these experiences, I have also routinely consulted with people to gain insights about my students and myself. Expanding my own self-

understanding is a key part of being with people and to being sensitive to interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics.

BDTI—A MODEL FOR RESPECTING DIVERSITY IN SUPERVISION

Over the last 20 years, I have become much more grounded and intentional about the theories that inform my supervision. Whether the theories focus on group functioning, on personality development, theological understanding, or basic communication; they inform, guide, support, instruct, limit, correct, and affirm me in my supervision of students. My CPE supervisory students have given the model I have created for looking at supervision the acronym BDTI, as outlined below. When talking about CPE supervision it is imperative to me to talk about all four of these aspects in order to have well informed and helpful supervision of students, as follows:

Behavior (or actions): What is the behavior that you see or don't see? Many people are so good at "telling the story" that they get caught up in the story and do not go beyond "just telling the story." Describing the behavior they observe as succinctly as possible is important. Describing the behavior is like telling another story. "I was talking to a patient and I noticed that every so often the patient would stare out of the window as if she were thousands of miles away;" or, "As I talked to the doctor every few seconds or so (it seemed) she looked at her wristwatch and then glanced down the corridor."

Dynamics: What are the dynamics of the behavior or actions you observe? Dynamics can be interpersonal or intrapersonal. What happens socially, spiritually, psychologically when you experience the behavior of the person with whom you are speaking? What happens to the person inter- and intra-personally when you observe or experience these behaviors? You may become aware of interactions between you and the other person or interactions within the other person, which can give you an insight as to what is motivating these behaviors. Are the dynamics power over/power under? Are the behaviors pushing people away? Are they shutting the person down? Looking at these dynamics can lead to understanding how the behavior is or is not serving them.

Theory: Using a specific theory that you know, what light does it shed on the behaviors and dynamics of individuals or relationships? What do specific theories say about ways of responding to or addressing these individual behaviors and dynamics? What insights do you gain from the theory

about what might be motivating the person? Reviewing current theory can enhance the overall understanding of a specific situation and your potential responses to that situation.

Intervention (or strategy): In light of a better understanding of the behavior, dynamics, and how theory addresses and informs the expanded understanding of the behavior and dynamics, what is the supervisory intervention or strategy that you would choose to address the situation? What various supervisory options or strategies do you have to address the situation? In light of who you are and how you prefer to supervise, what intervention or strategy would you use to address the situation?

An important cultural factor that aided me in my supervision in Asia is Confucian philosophy, which infuses much of China, including Hong Kong. Basic Confucian philosophy encourages and supports honoring and respecting one's elders and teachers. This aspect of Confucian philosophy was at work as I supervised CPE at Nethersole. The factors that were at work that aided my supervision are as follows: First, I was there as teacher. The teacher is highly regarded and this worked in my favor. When I said something the next person to speak often would say, "As Reverend Seeger said..." The second was my age—I am 70 years old, have a white beard, and am balding. These are typical signs of wisdom and old age. The third is that I am male—in Confucian philosophy deference is paid to males. Most of the time, these factors served me well in this context—what I said was respected and highly regarded and people sought me out for consultation. They wanted to have my opinion on various topics, especially if the topics related to ministry, chaplaincy, CPE, and other allied topics.

WHAT INTERFERED WITH THE SUPERVISION OF THE CPE STUDENTS?

Before arriving in Hong Kong, I had imagined that what would inhibit or limit my supervision of students would most likely be something related to cultural differences. This could include styles of communication, the relationship of the student to the teacher, roles of men and women, being from different racial, ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. I was surprised when I realized what interfered more than any other factor was the difference in belief about the Bible among students and the supervisor. The theological frameworks among the students in the group and myself ranged all the way from the Bible being the inerrant word of God, to the belief that whatever is described in the Bible is completely true and accurate for today,

to the other end of the spectrum, in which God's self is revealed in many ways and the Bible is one of these many sources of revelation.

The greatest subject of discord had to do with the role that Jesus plays in the greater scheme of things. In the first worship I led, and whenever I prayed, I did not pray to Jesus neither did I conclude in Jesus' name. Most of my students appreciated the inclusiveness of the words of my prayer. Because I did not use Jesus' name, I was perceived at least by one student as not being Christian. The beliefs of the people in the CPE program ranged from one end of the continuum, that belief in Jesus is the most important factor of life and the only way to avoid eternal damnation in the fire of hell. On the other end of the continuum was the understanding that Jesus was a wise person who offered important information about life and living and that following his teachings can make you a better person. All five of the students are Christian. Two were born into Christian families and they continue to embrace their family's religious tradition and three converted to Christianity as adults. Those who converted to Christianity are now members of Christian churches that tend more toward the belief that Jesus is the only one who can save you from your sins and to keep you from eternal damnation in hell.

THE CHALLENGE OF STUDENT X

One of the "visit regulations" for visiting patients in the CPE Student Handbook at Nethersole Hospital states: *Listening to is more useful than talking, don't hard sell your religion.* This was a major challenge for several students this summer. Their own Christian denominations pride themselves on overtly and intensely "leading people to Christ." Student X had created a flip chart that takes you through the key principles of Christianity and ends at the interpersonal level inviting the person to give their life over to Christ. Student X's flip chart exemplified the exact opposite of the CPE visiting regulations.

In the first individual supervisory meeting with Student X, I learned that he was using the flip chart as the main focus of visiting with patients. I tried a gentle reminder approach to the visiting regulations, which did not work. Next, I simply stated that he could not continue the practice of using the flip chart to focus on converting patients—this did not work either. Finally, I emphatically declared that he could not ever use the flip chart and the method of converting people while visiting patients as part of the CPE

program. It was only when I raised my voice, made imperative statements about what he could and could not do that he agreed not to use the flip chart again.

This same Student X was clear about “Who is right and who is wrong?” and “What is good and what is bad?” This either/or thinking permeated his approach to most aspects of life including his CPE experience. On a regular basis, I presented theoretical frameworks for understanding how to be a better presence to the patients and family members that were being visited. I did not present these theoretical frameworks as the “right way” of visiting patients in the hospital. I presented these frameworks as alternative ways of thinking about or looking at patient visitation. For example, I suggested that when visiting a patient it is helpful to learn about the patient, who they are, what is happening with them when they are in the hospital, and what kinds of concerns they might have that the chaplain could respond to and possibly assist them with. From the perspective of Student X, a chaplain’s first priority was to determine whether the patient was a born-again Christian. Once that was determined, you can decide what you do next. If they were born-again, it was appropriate to proceed with finding out more about them. If they were not born-again, then it was imperative to preach the gospel to them so that they might be saved.

A further example of either/or thinking at work with Student X was that he did not regard me as being a credible source of knowledge and information because I was a “foreigner.” I learned from the student who was doing simultaneous translation for me that when this student was not speaking directly to me, he called me “the foreigner” in Cantonese. According to him I did not know Hong Kong culture and religious practices, so whatever I had to offer was not helpful to him. As the foreigner I had nothing to offer to him.

I observed a similar dynamic occur between Student X and other students in the CPE program. The difference was that Student X perceived the others as not embracing the core beliefs that he held, so he would dismiss them because their beliefs were not the same as his. The other male student was very open to and interested in using inclusive language when talking about God and when praying. He expressed appreciation and delight when I prayed or talked about God in an inclusive way. He had wanted to expand his approach to prayer and conversation with people. At times, when he was relating to Student X, the other male student found that Student X would also dismiss him because he had not strictly held on to praying to

Jesus and keeping prayers and conversation Christo-centric. In situations like this I “supervised” the situation by talking about how one relates to, or ministers to, a person who is rejecting you on ideological grounds. It became an opportunity for us to talk about grace and acceptance. Student X did not welcome this conversation because he perceived the rest of the CPE group as having lost sight of the Christian message as he perceived it—that we were to embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior and that would put us right with God and with other people.

In a similar either/or dynamic with another student, one of the women, who was born and raised in Hong Kong in a Christian family, who actively embraced Christian values and also indicated that she was attracted to other females, got into an either/or, right/wrong dynamic at the mid-term evaluations. In her mid-term evaluation, she had affirmed Student X and had offered support to him. When he presented his mid-term evaluation, he did not acknowledge the support and affirmation she had given him. She challenged him for not acknowledging her support for him. My assessment of the interaction between the two was that ideologically they were at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of what is acceptable in relationships; therefore, he was not able to accept and/or receive her affirmations. Because of his ideological beliefs that same sex relationships are not acceptable, he rejected her affirmations of him. It seemed to me that in a convoluted way, Student X’s accepting her affirmations might appear to be an affirmation of her lifestyle.

What I Learned from the Challenge of Student X

As the summer unfolded, I was glad that I had been involved in learning cultural effectiveness for many years in my CPE supervision. My curiosity and respect for all of the students assisted me in learning more about them. My personal growth in self-awareness and self-understanding also served me well in my supervision of these students. The experiences this summer program in Hong Kong gave me were a live opportunity to utilize my BDTI methodology when supervising these students.

With Student X, in particular, I learned that he had been asked to leave one seminary in Hong Kong because of his behavior of challenging the teachers. As this summer unfolded, I observed that he easily would become adversarial with almost anyone. He shared with me that his biggest fear would be that he would also be asked to leave the CPE program, which would effectively end his career because successfully completing CPE was a

requirement to remain in seminary. By being curious and respectful of him, I also learned that his own family life was troubled and that he was essentially alone on all fronts. What I learned in retrospect (feedback from his exit interview with the Professional Advisory Committee, as reported to me by the other students) was that during the last half of the summer he chose to become quiet in the CPE program and to share only what he had to share so that he would not be expelled from the CPE program. He participated in the activities of the CPE program, while remaining non-committal with what was happening and minimally participating in the activities of the program.

I assessed that the dynamics of Student X's behavior were to keep himself insulated from what was happening in CPE, while being enough involved in the program so that he would not be asked to leave again. Throughout the summer he walked a fine line between challenging what was being presented and doing just enough to keep him in the program. His goal was not to be asked to leave once again, which would probably have ended his seminary career. Whether Student X learned very much during the summer is questionable.

WHAT WENT WELL

I was impressed with the overall desire of most of the students in this summer CPE program to learn as much as they possibly could about how to be an effective chaplain and minister. They were eager for feedback and suggestions. When a new approach was described in one of the CPE group learning activities or in a seminar on pastoral care most of the students were eager to learn more and to put into practice what they had just learned.

I did observation visits with each of the students. They were nervous that I would be following them. They wanted to do well, yet they were concerned their anxiety would inhibit them from doing a good job. I was reminded of the importance of parallel process. The students were responding in their patient visits as I had experienced them in the group learning activities. Since three of the students were fluent in Cantonese, their primary ministry was with Cantonese-speaking people. I was curious about how that was going to go when I would be focusing on their body language, their tone of voice, and their demeanor without understanding the words that were spoken. In my more than 30 years of supervising CPE, I had done that before and had found the experience very revealing.

This experience confirmed for me the general knowledge that only approximately seven percent of our communication is carried in the actual words we say—ninety-three percent of the communication is in the various aspects of *how* we speak the words plus our body language. The students were amazed that for the most part I understood fairly well what had gone on between them and the patient. I was able to give them specific feedback that would enhance their patient visits. The students came away from the experience with enhanced ways of relating to the patients and their families. The students were able to gain new skills and to practice them in their delivery of care.

One way in which I experienced that these CPE students were very similar to others I have supervised is in how they initially perceived themselves and how that perception changed as the summer progressed. Most were quite nervous about introducing themselves to complete strangers and imagining that these strangers would even want to talk with them. They could not imagine walking into someone's hospital room, introducing themselves, and being welcomed by the patient and/or family member. Many wondered: "What do I have to offer these people?" "Will they even accept me?" "What if they are not Christian or do not believe?" Once again the students were surprised how welcome they felt—and whether the student believed it or not—the patient was happy someone came in to spend some time with them.

One required activity for each student in the Nethersole CPE program was to present a creative seminar to their group. Essentially, the assignment was to select one of the goals they had chosen for the summer and prepare a didactic seminar using creativity to help explore some aspect of that goal. Each of the five students led these seminars. I was impressed with how they created an experience for the group, helping the group better understand the goal they were working on, and expanding their own understanding of the goal as well. An example of one seminar: The student had a goal to learn to better understand what it is like for elderly people to be in the hospital and what important skills the caregiver needed to learn. She arranged to have each of the group members do some aspect of care for an elderly person, who was hard of hearing and had limited eyesight, so that they could experience the challenges, frustrations, and joys of assisting a disabled elderly person. Cautiously, the students all got involved in the experience and by the time the exercise was over, everyone had taken part and had come to

realize how challenging it is to care for an elderly person and how challenging it is to be one, too.

CONCLUSION

Fairly early during this summer, I realized that I needed to draw upon the wisdom that I had gained reading Angeles Arrien's book, *The Fourfold Way*.² Briefly, in this book Arrien recounts a study that she had made of Native American spirituality. She found that within most expressions of Native American spirituality there were four qualities embraced by them. These four qualities (now stated in my own words) have been important guiding principles for me as I supervise students: 1) Be present (show up); 2) Respond from the heart to things of heart; 3) Suspend judgment; and 4) Let go of outcomes. By including these qualities in my supervision of students, I reminded myself that how I was being with the students was important to their learning. If I was attached to whether or not they learned anything, I would become frustrated, and maybe even discouraged. Because Student X did not want to be kicked out of this CPE program, he adjusted his behaviors to fit in and to meet the expectations set out by the institution and the CPE program. When I remembered to respond to him from these four qualities, his behavior adjusted and adapted to help him meet his goal—to complete this summer unit of CPE. I was able to communicate with him in a non-judgmental, non-anxious way that there were minimum expectations he must meet in order for his goal to be met. When he reported to me in individual supervisory meetings some of his health problems, I was able to be empathetic towards him and he appreciated the care I offered. I became more accurate in my assessments of him during the summer and became clearer what I could expect of him.

There is a wise saying about group dynamics, "You cannot change just one thing." I realized that as I changed how I was relating to Student X, the other members of the group began to change how they were relating to each other also. The rough start within the group was behind us and for most of the members of the group they were able to learn from their patient visits, from their own reflections, from each other, and from me. Not everyone made significant strides in their learning; however, many of the group members gained important insights about themselves as ministers and the ways that they could minister to others. I am not saying that this was a perfect ending, but it was good enough!

I am deeply grateful for the experience of supervising a unit of CPE in Hong Kong this summer and for all my years as an ACPE supervisor that gave me the training and expertise to conduct this CPE unit. I learned how universal the process of learning-by-doing is; I realized how important the action/reflection method is for effective adult learning; and I delighted in the vast diversity of people that I met and worked with this summer. Particularly, I am grateful for my CPE group, the Chaplains Department, and the Nethersole Hospital that made this whole experience possible.

NOTES

1. John L. Kater, "Spiritual Formation for Ministry in the Context of the Anglican Church of Hong Kong," *Reflective Practice* 34 (2014), 108–118.
2. Angeles Arrien, *The Fourfold Way: Walking the Paths of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer, and Visionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).