

## Some Benefits of Using Technology in Supporting and Nurturing Student Ministers in Field Education

Ronald W. Baard

Over the last few decades, the use of technology has become more and more important to all aspects of theological education. Distance learning in various forms, ranging from online course offerings to classes that are video-conferenced to other locations, has become a necessity in a time of diminishing resources and concern over course enrollments. In the area of field education, how does technology make a positive difference? In other words, what are the challenges—but even more, what are the distinct advantages—of engaging and supervising aspects of theological field education in this technological and digital age?

Readers may remember that the 2011 issue (volume 31) of this journal focused on the theme of “Formation and Supervision in a Digital Age.” Former editor Herbert Anderson, in his opening editorial for that issue, reminded readers of the appropriateness of this theme, given that 2011 was the first issue of the journal to be available globally because of the journal’s intentional change to an online, open access, electronic publishing process. The entire issue of volume 31 contains a range of articles still highly relevant now (or perhaps even more so) in today’s rapidly changing environment in theological education. Although the range of articles in that issue touched on many aspects of theological education that are being adapted to take ad-

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vantage of beneficial applications of various forms of technology (including the field of pastoral care), no specific articles in that issue reflected on the practical benefits of integrating simple and readily available technologies into students' experience of theological field education. A related article by field education professor Susan Fox and director Stephanie Croom does suggest important new practices for orienting and training field education supervisors using distance learning tools. Near the end of their article, they reflect together that "utilizing technology is now essential to our work in supervision and field studies; we are only now beginning to recognize the potential it has for our work together."<sup>1</sup>

Most of my work at Bangor Theological Seminary in Maine during my first six years as a faculty member there was involved with guiding the field education program (named "mentored practice" at the seminary) at both our Portland and Bangor campuses. Each master of divinity student was required to complete two semesters of mentored practice in an approved site over the course of his or her degree program. The oversight of this program was travel- and labor-intensive work, as is the case with all such programs at theological schools. During these years, in addition to my work with the mentored practice program, I also taught pastoral studies classes for M.Div. students. (Note: Bangor Theological Seminary closed in June 2013.)

#### THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEXT: MAINE AND NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

The setting for the field education program at Bangor Theological Seminary was northern New England. The seminary was "a school in two places," with campuses in both Bangor and Portland, Maine, and covered in large measure the needs of the New England states, including parts of New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. In terms of the context within the state of Maine, some claim there are "two Maines," by which they mean (1) greater southwestern Maine from Kittery to Portland to Brunswick and (2) inland, northern, and "downeast" Maine. Actually, I have found it is far more accurate to talk of "three Maines," with the third Maine being coastal Maine. Coastal Maine has by far the most resources economically. In recent decades, more and more persons of means from out of state have bought land parcels on the coast of Maine (as well as other parts of Maine), even far up the coast of Maine, and have thus driven up real estate

values and made it harder for “real Mainers” to keep up with property taxes and general living expenses. Inland, northern, and “downeast” Maine present another picture—one of diminished resources and a slower economy; one that is more rural and agricultural. The economics of the timber industry in this huge geographic region (Maine is still over 90% forested) goes up and down, and thus the economies of many northern Maine communities follow in its wake. In some counties in this northern Maine region, the regional dynamics are similar to small communities in Appalachia. Portland and southern Maine provide another picture, for they share in the energy and vitality of the economy of Boston, northern Massachusetts, and southern New Hampshire, where the culture tends to be much more cosmopolitan and urban.

#### TIME AND TRAVEL DEMANDS IN CONTEXT

The geographic vastness of Maine and the wider region made the time and travel demands on me as the mentored practice professor a bit daunting. When I began the position, I made a commitment to visit each student’s ministry site (for the purpose of direct observation and “coaching”) once each semester. After a couple of years of this approach (and putting thousands of miles on my seminary-provided car), along with fulfilling my additional teaching responsibilities and other duties at the seminary, I found that I needed to make some adjustments. Though I had learned a lot about the variety of churches and other ministry placements across the state, and the students along with supervising ministers appreciated both the support and the feedback, the travel and time demands related to this part of my work were edging out needed time and energy for my other responsibilities. Since a full year (two semesters) of fieldwork was required of each student, I rolled back my commitment to a more realistic goal of one on-site observational visit per year per student. Some time passed, and as my “other duties as assigned” increased I found maintaining even the rolled-back level of visitation challenging. At that point, after a conversation with the academic dean of Bangor Theological Seminary, we decided to try to find ways to use technology as a means of reducing the travel and to see what other hidden benefits such technology might bring to the students’ overall experience in the mentored practice program.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE "VIRTUAL SITE VISIT" ASSIGNMENT

So, I began to experiment with a new alternative to personal on-site visits, specifically "electronic" or "virtual" site visits. Rather than traveling to the student's place of ministry, I asked students to produce a video or DVD (or another visual representation) of their student ministry location, with the idea of presenting a visual/verbal picture of their mentored practice experience as a class requirement. Most of the sites were small churches, though some were hospitals or non-profit community organizations of one kind or another. To make the assignment a bit more interesting, and to fit with the emphasis and commitment to the justice dimensions of practical work at our seminary, I also asked the students to demonstrate in their videos how they were fulfilling the required emphasis in their fieldwork on the outreach/social justice aspects of ministry. When students first heard of the assignment, I sometimes heard audible protests or, more often, sighs of angst that expressed their fear of using technology. Most of our seminary students were at midlife or beyond, and often they told me that they felt perplexed by any type of technology. So, when called to use a DVD player in their living room, they turned to their children or teenagers to help them out! But then the students got to work, and on the whole they produced amazing results. The assignment in the course syllabus read as follows:

Electronic Site Visit and Community Outreach/Social Justice Requirement: Prepare a video or DVD to represent your ministry site to the rest of the class. Your video/DVD must include some way of telling others how you fulfilled the required emphasis on community outreach/social justice at your site and with your mentor this semester. Please share your "electronic site visit" (ESV) along with a very brief (10 minutes or less) presentation at the 11th or 12th meeting of the class – please see the class calendar.<sup>2</sup>

This assignment was made, of course, within the context of many other requirements during the flow of the weekly seminar. For example, students were required to give case study presentations (two case studies for each student each semester) in which they shared a ministry event that they had experienced and then received confidential feedback from their colleagues. There were also seminar sessions devoted to themes of self-care, along with an occasional guest speaker—usually experienced church pastors with expertise in particular areas of ministry.

*Challenges, Benefits, and Results of Virtual Site Visits*

The virtual site visit assignment required students to think directly about the use of technology in the midst of doing their assigned pastoral work. Again, for some, this immediately raised fears about using technology, in the sense of feeling inexperienced or ill prepared to fulfill the assignment. Some said they had no experience making a video. My approach was to let students coach each other on the mechanics of these aspects of the assignment while also offering some of the most anxious a “low-tech” version of the assignment: simply to take photos of various aspects of their ministry site and share them with the class with an oral narration of some kind. For some, this was as simple as pasting photos on a large poster board for the class to see; for others, digital photos were assembled into a slide show using computer projection technology. A few students took the “low-tech” option, but most asked for some help and had a “technology-savvy” church or family member help them produce the required video or DVD.

Toward the end of the semester, when students shared their virtual site visits with the rest of the class, good things happened. A positive energy filled the classroom because students looked forward to “seeing the sights” of the real ministries of their colleagues. There was a great sense of collegiality as students, one by one, moved to the front of the class, linked their laptop computers to the classroom projection system, and began their presentations. Some students prepared more elaborate presentations that synced music to the visual images, and others showed their video or slides while giving an oral interpretation. Most presentations exceeded the allotted ten minutes, but this seemed right because the enthusiasm of the class was high. Two full three-hour class sessions were devoted to the sharing of these presentations, so there was enough extra time available when presentations went longer than required or expected.

At the outset, it became very clear that one of the obvious advantages of the assignment for the seminar group as a whole was that everyone could “travel” via virtual means to each place of ministry and ask questions, voice affirmations, and gain new perspectives on their colleagues’ various styles of ministry in a particular context. Another distinct benefit was that it became one of those assignments for the classroom that had life after the class was over. Many of the students found, somewhat serendipitously, another use for their video production. Some showed it at the upcoming annual meeting of their congregation, to which their audiences responded with

much delight and positive feedback. Others shared their video production at their next church supper, to the enjoyment and appreciation of all in attendance. Some of those in hospital settings and engaged in student chaplaincy gave me a copy to use with future students to interest them in this type of ministry. (Note: These chaplaincy students had to take extra care in the production of their videos due to strict HIPAA regulations.)

This “second use” of the video production was especially meaningful for those who had had help from active church laypersons in producing their videos. As a further refinement to this assignment, a field education professor might consider asking each student to collaborate intentionally with a small group of laypersons to assist in the production of the video so as to energize some laypeople into thinking about their church in new ways (from the perspective of an outside visitor, for example), and to encourage asking questions about the setting and ministry. Doing the assignment this way could instill in them something like “pride of place” or “joy in the home church community” and extend the benefits to a wider circle of participants.

Another distinct benefit of the assignment was the witnessing of a passion for ministry that surfaced in some students as they shared their ministry sites with their seminar colleagues. The joy of doing ministry with and for others in a real context, including the need to preach and teach, counsel and work for justice in various settings, stretched these students, and they loved the stretching! And, in terms of their preparation and study for pastoral ministry, it required the magic of “integration”—their work in church history, in systematic theology, in ethics, in biblical studies, in pastoral studies all came together in joyful video presentations of embodied ministries in particular contexts.

I am convinced that field education is one of the places where truly important ministerial and pastoral formation happens. For it happens when the student minister needs to practice the art of ministry joyfully in a setting that demands her or his all. It happens when, in a given instance of ministry, ministry students truly see the various dimensions of academic study reflected in the act of ministry. No more “talk” about the importance of the “action-reflection” model of ministry, for in sharing these videos the true excitement was in the doing of that ministry and in the sharing of the results with others.

*Some Theological Reflections on the Virtual Site Visit Assignment*

As a field education teacher and seminar leader, I have been responsible for taking dozens and dozens of students through the exercise of “theological reflection” on ministry in their context. So, here I offer some of my own theological reflections on the creation and implementation of this “virtual site visit” assignment with student ministers who worked within the context of northern New England and Bangor Theological Seminary.

This assignment introduced, in part, the creative use of visual arts into the classroom setting. In that sense, it can be seen as part of the grander project of moving into “a new era of religious communication” (this phrase is by Pierre Babin, from his book by the same title<sup>3</sup>) because it asked all seminar participants to engage fully with the audiovisual, multimedia age we are now living in. The old saying that a “picture is worth a thousand words” helps us appreciate some of the deep dimensions that open up when one uses this type of resource in the classroom.

Christian Scripture also helps stimulate other theological reflections on this assignment and its outcomes:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to the whole house. In the same way, let your light so shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father-Mother in heaven. (Matt. 5:14–16, AIV<sup>4</sup>)

When I put this text from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in conversation with the assignment and the results it produced, the theological theme of *illumination* shines through. Jesus’ words here are about the power of people to become illumined by God and so illumine others. This reminds me of another powerful text from Exodus, where Moses climbs the mountain and is illumined by closer contact with God as he receives the commandments for his people, a people who so desperately need the illumination of the commandments’ guidance. Even the transfiguration scene of Jesus in the synoptic gospels is called to mind—where Jesus is “illumined” in the presence of his closest disciples Peter and James and John. The effect is powerful, so much so that the disciples do not want to descend from the mountain but instead desire to stay in that illumined place on the mountaintop for a while longer.

And so it was with many of these students, at least in my memory. As they experienced the enhanced community of classroom collegiality that al-

ways comes at the end of a semester in the mentored practice seminar, and as they shared in the “glow” (literally and figuratively) of the visual representations of various places of ministry on the large screen in the front of the classroom, they were in some sense “illuminated” by the experience of fulfilling the required assignment. No theological field educator could ever ask for more. In the words of Parker Palmer, a wise contemporary leader of teachers in so many different settings, I felt the pure joy of experiencing those times when teaching and learning are working well:

I have no question that students who learn, not professors who perform, is what teaching is all about: students who learn are the finest fruit of teachers who teach. Nor do I doubt that students learn in diverse and wondrous ways, including ways that bypass the teacher in the classroom and ways that require neither a classroom nor a teacher.

But I am also clear that in lecture halls, seminar rooms, field settings, labs and even electronic classrooms—the places where most people receive their formal education—teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions, and good teaching requires the inner sources of both the intent and the act.<sup>5</sup>

## REVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate some of the challenges, along with some of the distinct advantages, of engaging and supervising aspects of theological field education in this technological and digital age. The specific context for these reflections has been Maine and northern New England, a region that poses many challenges for efficient use of energy given the time and travel demands that go with this territory. Every region has unique challenges imposed by local geography and economics.

To reduce the stress and strain on the field education supervisor in this region, with oversight responsibilities over large groups of churches over a wide region, a virtual site visit assignment was devised. This required students to create videos of their student ministry work in assigned churches and present them to their student colleagues in a seminar class setting. The assignment challenged many of the students at many levels, but it also brought unique rewards, including the pure joy that learning brings when a new approach is mastered.



Theological reflections on this whole experience can go in many different directions. The words of Jesus, who referred to his followers as “the light of the world,” suggests the theological theme of illumination shining through in students’ lives and ministries. Resistance to a new assignment gave way to excitement, and that gave way to grasping the required elements and finally to mastery of a new technological skill. As often happens when serious theological students encounter a new challenge in learning, my students found meaning and joy in this new approach and even voluntarily expanded upon its original utility as a classroom exercise, opting for wider sharing of their videos to enrich their assigned ministry contexts. In the end, it was a rewarding experience in teaching and learning for all concerned.

True to the words of the age-old proverb “necessity is the mother of invention,” it seems that the needs of the geographic and economic contexts of Maine and northern New England, including the limited resources of a small regional seminary, helped bring this assignment to life. In the words of Herbert Anderson, “Economic factors have dictated curricular redesign in order that advanced learning is accessible to, and affordable for, more individuals.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, beyond this distinctive factor, this assignment brought along with it several unique contributions to the enterprise of theological field education.

First, engaging this assignment helped students who are more visual learners; they fully enjoyed working with audiovisual tools. Second, this assignment opened up more collaborative approaches to learning instead of relying upon the all-too-common competitive modes of learning so often found in graduate theological education. Finally, in a surprising way, fulfilling this assignment in the context of the mentored practice seminar and students’ field education sites brought most of these students great joy.

Joy in any learning context is a valuable commodity! In a recent study, Finnish educational psychology researchers Tana Rantala and Kaarina Maatta set out “to decipher the essence of the joy of learning and the ways to enhance it at school. In the field of educational psychology, research on feelings is lacking, and the little that does exist has focused more on negative than positive feelings.”<sup>7</sup> Though their study offers direct insights on best practices in the realm of primary schools, many of Rantala and Maatta’s insights about the cultivation and inculcation of joy in learning can be applied to theological field education. For, as stated earlier in this article, and

it is worth repeating here in closing, this assignment resulted in the magic of “integration” being enthusiastically expressed when all came together in the students’ joyful video presentations of their embodied ministries in particular contexts across Maine and northern New England.

#### NOTES

- 1 Susan E. Fox and Stephanie B. Croom, “Overcoming Distance and Time: Online Supervisor Training in Contextual Education Programs,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31 (2011): 140.
- 2 Professor Ronald W. Baard, syllabus for the Mentored Practice Class, Bangor Theological Seminary, spring and fall 2006.
- 3 Pierre Babin with Mercedes Iannone, *The New Era in Religious Communication* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
- 4 Victor Roland Gold, et al., *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive: Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 5 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 6.
- 6 Herbert Anderson, “Teaching Practices Online: Different—Yes; Necessary—Yes,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31 (2011): 53.
- 7 Tana Rantala and Kaarina Maatta, “Ten Theses of the Joy of Learning at Primary Schools,” *Early Child Development & Care* 182, no. 1 (2012): abstract.