

Anatomy of a Site Visit

Christina R. Zaker

Field education is a critical component of any hands-on degree. Nursing and medical students have clinicals, education students are required to student teach, and social work and ministerial degrees require field education. This experience is an important blending of acquired head knowledge, hands-on praxis, contextual immersion, supervision, and reflection that shape a student's evolving vocational identity. Field education for a ministerial degree is where students learn to put into practice all they have learned as well as discover how they react under pressure, how they adapt to change, and how they relate to others. It is through field education that students take strides to integrate a clear vision of themselves as a minister.

One important component of the field education experience is the site visit. This is when someone from the school makes an intentional visit to the student while the student is on site at his or her field education placement. As the Director of Field Education at Catholic Theological Union (CTU), I visit the students in their places of ministry at least once each year. This gives them a chance to show me around and introduce me to the people who are important to them in their ministry. It also gives the site a chance to see me and, by extension, CTU, on its own sacred ground. Each year, site supervisors are asked to come to CTU for various orientations, interviews,

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evaluation meetings, and continuing education events, so it is important for me to be present to their community as well.

What I would like to do in this article is to focus in on the thinking behind a site visit: the steps to organizing such a visit, the conversations that are helpful to have around a site visit, and some strategies for accomplishing this type of visit when you have students whose sites are out of state or country. Site visits play a critical role in the entire field education experience for both students and site supervisors. They are also one of the most important pieces in building relationships with site supervisors. This article is an attempt to shine a magnifying glass, so to speak, on this one particular moment in the field education experience in order to give it the full development it needs. This deep dive gives field and contextual educators a chance to explore how to maximize the growth of both students and site supervisors through these visits.

NOMENCLATURE

In the world of field education, certain terms are used differently by different schools. At CTU, we have consistently used *field* education rather than *contextual* education for a couple of reasons. First, CTU focuses on contextual education throughout its curriculum. We have intercultural and interreligious courses and degrees, and each course explores contextual lenses in unique ways. Field education is one piece of the broader understanding of contextual education that is a part of any CTU degree. Second, we have explored intentionally the connection between field education and Pope Francis's call for the Church to be a "field hospital." We see *field education* as the term that embraces our Catholic imperative to teach ministry students to meet people where they are, respond to their needs, and journey alongside them on the road to Emmaus.

There are also distinctions in what the ministry supervisors are called. Some schools reference these people as *teaching pastors* or *supervisor mentors* or other such names. For the purposes of this essay, I will call the persons in the community who supervise the students in their ministry *site supervisors* and their places of ministry *sites*. There is a critical need for supervision as one begins ministry, and thus I use that term first. My hope is that through time the students will see their supervisors as both teachers and mentors.

SITE VISITS DISCUSSED AT ORIENTATION

At CTU, students and site supervisors both participate in an orientation before the start of their placement. At these orientations, it is explained that CTU sees site visits as an important effort to build relationships with the sites, to offer mentoring to new site supervisors, and to give the students a chance to articulate what it is they are learning and integrating in their fieldwork. The site visit becomes an important component of the educational endeavor.

The students are also reassured at orientation that these are not “graded” gatherings. Students are expected to cooperate in the scheduling of a site visit at least once per year, but site supervisors and students can request a site visit at any time, and there is no grade associated with these visits. We want students to understand that these visits provide a chance for them to demonstrate what they have learned about their ministry site and an opportunity for them to build the relationships critical for successful placements. If they have a special event coming up, they can use a site visit to showcase it; if they have concerns or if there is a disconnect between the student and the site supervisor, they can request a facilitated conversation. The orientation helps to explain that site visits are a tool for each of the three people involved (student, site supervisor, and director of field education) to utilize as needed.

SETTING UP A SITE VISIT

Generally, it is best to wait until students have been at their sites at least a month before visiting. This gives them a chance to get established and begin to feel confident in their efforts. Begin scheduling a visit by communicating to the student that it is time to arrange a site visit. At that time, it is helpful to suggest again that students can invite you to come in and observe their teaching or preaching or special event. They are encouraged to ask their site supervisor for possible times, as it is important to sit down with the site supervisors during these visits as well. Site visits can happen any day of the week and any hour of the day. I have been at a deportation center at 5 a.m., at a pet blessing on a college campus on a late Friday night, at a religious education class on a Sunday morning, and at a soup kitchen on a weekday afternoon. Ministry happens all the time, and being present to the students in their ministry is significant.

Site Visit Parables

Sitting quietly in the back of the chapel,
Drenched in sunlit hues,
Filled with teenagers avoiding eye contact.

She tells the story of the Good Samaritan.
While a reluctant
“volunteer” carries the injured traveler in.

“Of course we know who God is here,” she beams at them,
“But imagine, you . . .”
“If you were that innkeeper, what would you do?”

The students jot notes and hesitant hands rise up,
They ask more questions.
She smiles, “That is a good start, keep pushing.”

All the while, seeds are randomly thrown about,
the sower smiles
at rocks and weeds; confident of the harvest.

—Christina R. Zaker

OBSERVATIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

Site visits offer an essential frame for observing the student. Even though I have been to each of the CTU sites many times over the years, each new visit provides an opportunity to learn something new, to build on relationships, and to observe from each new student’s perspective. One of the first assignments students are asked to do in their placements is to develop a “thick description” of their site. They are asked to describe as much as they can about the place, people, mission, demographics, identities, and values.

We revisit these thick descriptions throughout the year to see what more they have learned after being immersed in the community for a semester. Site visits provide an opportunity to talk about these thick descriptions and to note whether they understand the complexities of the site and how their own lenses impact their description.

Much can also be learned from what a student points out and who they talk with on the tour. Stay in tune to the casual conversations that take place during the visit. There is much to be learned from them. At times, a site supervisor will join us for the tour, too. This is helpful in that it gives the site supervisor a glimpse of what the student sees. The conversation generally points out new growing edges for the student, and I have also found that as I challenge the student with suggestions, site supervisors gain confidence in how they can encourage the student to grow. One example of this is a site visit when an international student, site supervisor, and I were walking around a hospital. As the student was showing me the unit he regularly visited, I noticed that he had not engaged any of the nurses or other staff milling around in the halls. I asked him if he talked with these folks at all, and he demurred, stating that didn't want to bother them. In the course of the conversation, it became clear that his lack of confidence in his language skills was also playing a role in his decision to not engage people other than his list of patients. The three of us talked about how ministry in a hospital is not only with the patients but also with the entire community. We laid out some suggested strategies for improving this type of casual encounter and specific goals to help with noting progress. The site supervisor appreciated the observation and target goals, which gave the site supervisor and student something to work toward together.

Another benefit of this type of visit is the chance to spend quality time with the site supervisor. When site supervisors come to campus for orientations or mornings of reflection at CTU, they are generally part of a crowd of thirty or so supervisors. Those settings are not conducive to individual conversations. Site visits allow for an extended conversation that is critical to building this partnership. I have found it helpful to foster these relationships so that when moments of chaos arise we know how to address the issue together.

MANAGING CHAOS

Generally speaking, placements are successful and site visits are simply times to build relationships and observe a student in ministry. However, occasionally a site visit is requested in order to calm a storm. A lot of planning, organizing, and praying come into play as placements are made, but once in a while there is chaos. Perhaps there has been turnover in site supervisors and the new site supervisor is unclear of his or her responsibilities. The student may have unforeseen stress factors that make their commitment to their placement fall below expectations. Sometimes it may simply be personality differences that a student is having a hard time navigating on his or her own. Whatever the case may be, sometimes site visits are requested because of a problem.

It is important to sit down with the student prior to the visit to make sure you understand his or her perspective. Sometimes you can offer the student strategies for moving forward without needing to have a facilitated conversation. But if the circumstances give no other option, sitting down to understand the student's perspective is important. The power dynamics at play between students and site supervisors often means that in a three-person meeting, the student loses confidence in his or her own voice. You will be able to encourage the student to speak from his or her perspective in the meeting if you have a sense of it beforehand.

Understanding the student's perspective ahead of time also allows you to begin anticipating ways the student may need to grow, change, or plan to move forward. Draw from your own knowledge in facilitation skills or work in conflict resolution to make sure each person has a safe place to share his or her concerns. Try to discern the level of trust and confidence the student and site supervisor have in each other as well as find out whether everyone is upholding their required expectations; this helps navigate the path forward. Only rarely have I been in a situation in which the placement was unsalvageable. Usually, these types of site visits go a long way in clearing the air and naming strategies for moving forward.

FOLLOWING UP

After every site visit, it is helpful to take a few notes regarding what was said and the growing edges the student might focus on in the coming

weeks. This allows you to pick up where you left off for each student and to continue challenging them in the areas discussed. You may find it helpful to also take notes on casual facts that were mentioned, such as if one site supervisor just had a baby or was in the midst of moving. Referring back to them in the next communication builds on your relationship with the site supervisor. I have found that email contact notes are a great way to supplement my memory. If the site visit was focused on problem-solving, sending an email to all participants to sum up the conversation and strategies moving forward as well as another email a couple of weeks later is critical to keeping everyone on the same page.

One reality for CTU is that a number of our site supervisors are also alumni of our school. This type of connected and ongoing involvement in the life of a community demonstrates CTU's commitment to the partnerships that we have and our understanding of how the longevity of relationships impacts both a student's education and also the life of the community. As a thank you for their partnership, site supervisors are allowed to take courses at CTU. So, some of our site supervisors have become alumni in the process of being a site supervisor. Others started out as CTU students and then took jobs with organizations that we have built relationships with over time. In either case, their familiarity with CTU and the life of being a student is helpful in the supervision/mentoring role that they play.

SITE VISITS AT A DISTANCE

As distance education becomes a more regular occurrence, we are also facing the reality that sometimes site placements are located in a different state or country.¹ Unfortunately, my budget does not allow me to do in-person site visits with all of these students, even though it would be fun! Regardless, it is still important to secure a stable and supportive site placement. Because these placements are often cultivated only for the one student and not for other students in subsequent years, there is the temptation to simply allow the student to find a site that works and let the year unfold without a site visit. However, it is still important to give the students a chance to test their contextual awareness of their site and to build their relationship with the site supervisor.

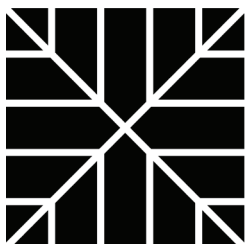
For every out-of-town site, I do an individual orientation in which I go over all of the details in our site supervisor handbook with the site supervisor on the phone. I also share with them some resources to read so they will have a better sense of what is being expected of them and where they can turn with concerns. Some of the ways that site visits can happen at a distance is through a video submission, conference calls, peer visits, or simply regular phone calls. The student can be asked to put together a video on their placement to supplement their thick description. Students are asked to submit this to both their placement course and their site supervisor. It is also possible to arrange a Zoom, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, or audio conference call. Bringing people together at one time is helpful, and the conversation generally brings clarity about things people did not know were issues.

Another possible way to do a site visit is to have a peer visit. This depends on the type of network your institution has, but, depending on the placement, you may be able to ask an alum or another person within your network to do a face-to-face site visit. This is a great opportunity to engage your alumni or other network, and it really is special for the student to have someone physically present. I also make it a point to call all new and distance site supervisors about once a month during their first placement. This type of touching base helps build new relationships and ensures everyone keeps the lines of communication open.

I am often touched by the reactions from students when I visit their sites. They truly appreciate the sense of connection and the chance to demonstrate how they are integrating what they are learning at school with what they are trying to put into practice in the field. I have offered here some simple suggestions for how to dive into site visits and have tried to give a sense of why they are a critical piece of field education. I hope this invites you to take a fresh look at site visits and to use them as a tool in both building relationships and networks with your sites and in educating your students.

NOTES

- 1 For additional reading on field education and distance learning, you may find chapters of this text helpful: Matthew Floding, ed., *Engage: A Theological Field Education Toolkit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2017).
- 2 For a solid orientation to field education for field educators, supervisors, and students, see the following texts: Matthew Floding, ed., *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011) and David O. Jenkins and P. Alice Rogers, eds., *Equipping the Saints: Best Practices in Contextual Theological Education* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2010). Readers can contact the author via email for a full bibliography of resources for theological field educators. New field educators are also encouraged to become members of the Association for Theological Field Education (atfe.org).
- 3 For additional reading on field education and distance learning, you may find chapters of this text helpful: Matthew Floding, ed., *Engage: A Theological Field Education Toolkit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2017).



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