

## **In Search of Theory and Criteria for the Practice of Distance-Supervision**

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The growing ease and efficiency of using electronic media for academic education promises to bring significant benefits to the field of clinical education. Individual phone sessions, along with the use of email for feedback, have been widely employed in clinical pastoral education (CPE) programs. Electronic access has been combined with telephone discussions to transmit didactic materials within established groups. Cost effectiveness, an increased demand for CPE programs, the possibility of more convenient continuing education opportunities for established practitioners, and the expansion of accredited programs into geographical, or ministerial areas not previously accessible, have spurred some CPE programs to extend their use of distance-education methods to include activities such as the processing of clinical material and interpersonal relationship sessions, long characteristic of tra-

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ditional programs accredited by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc. (ACPE).

Several programs, either not accredited or accredited by organizations that do not require clinical preparation, are currently offering to train chaplains completely online. At recent regional and national ACPE conferences, there has been discussion about experimenting with different uses of distance-education within accredited CPE programs. Such discussions have often focused on what is possible. Providing clinical supervision-at-a-distance, however, is very different from even the most traditional face-to-face, interactional methods emerging on the Internet. A firm grounding in written theological, educational, psychological, and group theory has been a fundamental requirement for certification in organizations such as the ACPE for decades and that requirement will remain important even when students work within digital media.

It appears that now is the time for us to ask what professional standards may need to be changed to assure the strong formation of future pastoral caregivers and minimize any possibility of eroding quality in CPE supervision. Each CPE supervisor's educational rationale needs to be designed to assist students in achieving their individual learning goals while at the same time continuing to maintain the high quality goals and standards of the ACPE. Both the autonomy of supervisory practice on the one hand, and accountability to the broader professional community on the other, will be served by a well-crafted rationale for the use of distance-education technologies in accord with the standards of accredited programs.

Two theoretical approaches are presented below in an effort to stimulate further reflection. One is written by Angelika Zollfrank, whose practice is guided by systems-oriented methods, psychodynamic understandings, and a constructionist-developmental theory. The second theoretical approach is written forth by Gordon J. Hilsman, whose supervision has been guided by psychoanalytic concepts, addiction recovery wisdom, and human development perspectives along with an evolutionary, personalist theology. The aim is to present theoretical approaches that explore the benefits and limitations of using distance-education methods effectively in CPE.

THEORY ONE: A SYSTEMS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATION  
IN PASTORAL EDUCATION

The CPE program at Massachusetts General Hospital uses systems-oriented theory and training as a primary tool to help students work towards achieving their personal learning goals and the fundamental objectives and outcomes of CPE. The following four key concepts are relevant to distance-supervision and expanded on below: (1) the boundaries in of time and space; (2) attunement to the other; (3) change and conflict resolution; and (4) phases of group development.

*The Boundaries of Time and Space*

Theologically, the relational context of the CPE educational system can be understood as a space that allows for the grounding of a group of colleagues, individual learners, and the supervisor in the space of G-d's heart. The heart of G-d metaphorically refers to the holding space of all life. It is in this holding environment that life unfolds and transformation becomes possible. In systems-oriented theory, it is assumed that group systems are defined in space and time.<sup>1</sup> Boundaries in time and space contain and help organize the energy of any group, enabling group members and the group-as-a-whole to survive, develop, and transform.<sup>2</sup> Space has traditionally referred to a shared geographical meeting place.

In systems-oriented training, much attention is given also to boundaries in time and *reality*. Students learn how to center themselves in the here-and-now, allowing them to bring their internal experiences into the group. There is encouragement to check out assumptions as a way of gathering information and coming into reality in interpersonal relationships.<sup>3</sup> All of these skills are crucial to effective pastoral caregiving with patients and families. While in CPE, students learn to take up their roles as learners, group members, chaplain interns, and professional caregivers. Through theological and ethical reflection, they each begin to form their unique pastoral identities.

A CPE supervisor who uses distance-education methods needs to pay close attention to assure that the boundaries in time and virtual-meeting space are crossed successfully enough to enable productive work. Energy and information are seen as equivalent and are both important resources in systems-oriented work.<sup>4</sup> A distance-learning-based CPE group needs to be especially mindful of developing and accepting norms of communication that enable information/energy to come into the educational system. As is

true in any CPE group, information that is shared outside of the boundaries of the educational system is lost for the learning and development of the group.

### *Attunement to the Other*

Key to human relating and spiritual caregiving is a sense of being understood and met as a person. Good-enough attunement is an important ingredient of CPE supervision—attunement refers to eye-contact, the mirroring of facial expressions, and aligned voice tone. This kind of attunement can be difficult to achieve, even in face-to-face groups, and CPE groups are tasked to study and become more aware of times when empathic relating breaks down. Theologically, such mis-attunement and breaking down of connection can be understood as separation from vital energy and as an experience of the disruption of community. In Christian language, bearing the cross of disconnection becomes the scaffolding for authentic human relating in which each person knows herself or himself to be provisional and ever in need of G-d's promise to make complete what is not yet finished, while simultaneously carrying all of G-d's creative potential. It is human to be disabled by disconnection and distance—and such distance may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or geographical in nature. Wisely used, technology in distance-education can become a creative tool—assisting connection. However, the same technology, when used less thoughtfully, may create mis-attunement and disconnection. While some misunderstanding is inevitable and needed for growth, it is important for spiritual caregivers to explore each experience of disconnection and associated feelings. How will distance-supervision methods help or hinder CPE students in studying the pitfalls, and delights, of human connection that are key for their ministry?

Traditionally, parallel processes and sufficient isomorphism between the educational system and students' pastoral caregiving relationships have been prime resources to the educational process. The primary questions to be answered are:

- Can these prime resources still be employed with sufficient depth and frequency in distance-supervision?
- Are human emotions, relational dynamics, and attunement sufficiently transmittable through electronic media?
- If the above elements are confirmed to be transmittable through electronic media, how can such information be brought into the educational systems of group and individual supervision?

Disconnection and objectification have long been understood as metaphors for human sin. Acts of acknowledging and feeling, seeing and hearing, attunement and mis-attunement, are important aspects of human reality in a broken world. Acknowledging such brokenness holds the promise for the liberating process of connection within communities of solidarity and accountability. CPE is unique in that it consistently measures both skill development and relational, experiential learning. In fact, the quality of a student's educational relationship reveals a CPE program's pastoral and ethical depth and strength.

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks of religious things as creating situations of responsibility that one cannot escape.<sup>5</sup> Prior to any conscious observation and reflection, each person's face becomes the face of the Other, of G-d. In thinking about standards for CPE distance-supervision, Levinas is instructive—if indeed we are called in spiritual caregiving to face others with what they struggle to face, how much more are we as supervisors called in a religious and ethical sense to face our students, to experience with them their struggles, to smell their fear in their Gethsemane moments?

For Levinas, intersubjective experience becomes 'ethical' in the sense that an "I" discovers its own particularity when it is singled out by the gaze of the "other." Viewing the other's face represents an invocation, a prayer that compels the listener to hear and respond.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, the face-to-face relationship creates a fundamental learning environment that confronts those who show up to participate in it. Levinas' philosophical contribution relevant to pastoral care and supervision is captured in the following quote:

The relationship with the Other (*Autrui*) puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. Is the Desire for the Other (*Autrui*) an appetite or a generosity? The Desirable does not gratify my Desire but hollows me out, and somehow nourishes me with new hungers. Desire is revealed to be goodness, ... 'insatiable compassion...'<sup>7</sup>

Although a CPE program based on distance-education methods may be cost-effective and feasible, the following crucial questions must be answered:

- How can distance-education make space and time for each participant's self in the face-to-face encounter, creating a deep, meaningful locus of relationality and transcendence?

- How can CPE programs using distance-education methods help inspire in the participant nourish the insatiable compassion needed for sustained spiritual caregiving?
- How can distance-learning create consistent communities of presence and blessedness that empty the participants without end, showing them ever-new resources for development?

### *Change and Conflict Resolution*

CPE is committed to awaken and nurture a passion and commitment in students to serve people who represent a wide variety of age groups, religions, spiritual beliefs, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and gender and sexual identities. Differences are seen as a resource for students' learning and development. Using a Christian metaphor for CPE, a diverse group of disciples is invited to reach out and "fish" for people. Students, with their supervisor, leave behind the safety of what seems certain in their individual stories and identities. Participants are called to become like a church for others<sup>8</sup> and "fish" for a wide variety of human beings. This requires that students move away from self-centeredness—that they engage in the discipline of connecting to similarities within what is apparently different. This discipline runs counter to the natural human tendency to come together around similarities and separate on differences.<sup>9</sup>

The most important contribution of systems-centered theory is the use of functional sub-grouping as a catalyst for change and conflict-resolution.<sup>10</sup> Students are asked to build on each others' contributions and to check whether the group is ready to explore the other side of an issue before they bring in a difference. Differences are contained in separate functional sub-groups until the difference, or conflict, can be identified and integrated in the group-as-a-whole.<sup>11</sup> In functional sub-grouping, members of one sub-group are asked to stay in eye-contact, drawing on functional dependency to explore both sides of an issue or an experience. Eventually, the group-as-a-whole will integrate increasing complexity. Subsequently, students are able to increasingly encounter and be comfortable with diversity in their pastoral care, while also developing a more solid sense of themselves in their pastoral role. The use of functional sub-grouping is possible when meeting in-person and or on the phone; however, use of sub-grouping using email may be unproductive. In email, the subtleties of voice tone and body language information are lost and reading or writing about emotional processes can be cumbersome, with ample opportunity for misunderstandings or projections.

Additionally, the contributions of slower or non-responding members of the sub-group may get lost. Feedback provided via email needs to be given thoughtfully—misunderstandings created in email may arouse emotions that are important resources for development and will, therefore, need to be addressed personally through the educational process. Also, in an email, there is the possibility that differences may not be acknowledged or explored as deeply as they might have been in face-to-face CPE groups. In sum, email communication does may not provide a good-enough container to serve either the educational process or the task.

### *Phases of Group Development*

Professional education for ministry seeks to help students to integrate cognitive theological concepts and experienced faith, head and heart, past and present, intimacy and otherness, and task and process. In this integrative process, students are asked to notice what happens for them in relationship to the realities of the human suffering and the pain that they encounter. They are also encouraged to deepen their awareness and learn from their experiences in relationship to self and others.

Using systems-oriented theory in the process of exploration, the supervisor works with the group-as-a-whole to help all members move through a predictable sequence of stages of development. The goal is to enhance students' ability to relate wholeheartedly, while being able to functionally take up their role in their ministry and connect with peer-learners, patients, and patient's families in increasingly more effective ways. In systems-oriented work, the barriers to these goals are systematically weakened to allow the natural forces of development and transformation to move the group—and the individual—forward.<sup>12</sup>

In the *first phase* of group development<sup>13</sup> within the CPE group, students learn to explore, rather than explain, their experiences. The impulse to flee the actual experience by diverting attention from reality, by creating an identified patient in the group, or by constricting emotions in tension can be strong. The facilitators of human relationships, and particularly educational relationships in CPE, need to be aware of the pitfalls of the "as if," inauthentic quality of relating during the "flight" phase of any educational group or pastoral relationship. Vagueness, speculations, and projections are all behaviors that reveal the underlying avoidant or ambivalent dynamics within the group. Observing and learning more about the dynamics of emotional

avoidance is useful and moving beyond it leads to increased effectiveness of students' work with patients and their families.

In a *second phase* of group development,<sup>14</sup> CPE student groups explore the impulse to persecute or target others for their differences. Sub-groups explore the pull to act-out in hostility or depression. Eventually groups move to exploring one-up/one-down role relationships, such as identified patient and care-taker, scapegoat and blamer, or the dynamics within a defiant versus compliant sub-group.<sup>15</sup> After these relationships are verbally identified, contained, explored, and processed—rather than being acted out—groups then move on to targeting the leader of the group, often blaming the supervisor for whatever feels wrong or uncomfortable. Usually the projections onto the leader metaphorically communicate each group member's experiences within their own primary relationships.<sup>16</sup> The work with dynamics of authority in the CPE group is essential to students' development of their own pastoral authority. Through insights gained from the group experiences, they are increasingly able to be truly present with those who seek their care. Also, this developmental and integrative work opens the door to a deepened use of their strengths and the confidence with their respective religious and spiritual traditions within pastoral care encounters.

It is questionable whether distance-supervision will prove itself capable of revealing and unraveling the persistent manifestations of emotional avoidance dynamics within the CPE group. Technology may be useful in bridging distances and offering innovative learning tools that otherwise might not be possible. However, distance-supervision may make it easier for some students to avoid authentic connections that are vitally necessary to interpersonal and group-as-a-whole learning. The following questions still need to be answered:

- What mode of distance-supervision technology and what frequency of its use is needed to successfully engage group-dynamics around authority?
- Are distance-supervision groups more prone to flee into premature intimacy, or exercise other avoidance reactions, as ways of avoiding the challenging explorations during the "flight" phase?
- How likely is it that group members will stay in modes of "as if" relating?

Lastly, it is often the most difficult and most rewarding part of systems-oriented group work in CPE for students to be able to see and sense the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole. Answers to these specific questions about group dynamics in distance-learning would be helpful:



- Would viewing the group on several screens at once make it more difficult for individual students to observe group-as-a-whole dynamics?
- Is it possible to observe with sufficient acuity and give feedback to individual students based on behaviors observed in the group that would be impactful for the students' ministry?

Clearly, more detailed inquiry needs to be done regarding the use of distance-technologies in traditional CPE, asking specific questions about what digital tools are best-suited to CPE, what other kinds of data will be needed to assure quality supervision, and how that data will be gathered.

#### THEORY TWO: EVOLUTION THEOLOGY FOR INTIMATE, COMMUNAL CARE

An evolutionary theology relevant for supervision begins with recognizing that the Earth has developed from a barren rock into a planet populated by a united global human community of loving people. Communal unity may not be the end of the evolution of the universe, but it is the most visible next step. Humans may not be the apex of evolutionary energy, but in our experience we are the most developed. Against enormous odds, inherent evils, and at a glacial pace, we are getting smarter, more physically attractive, and increasingly sensitive to one another's delight and pain century by century.

Thus far, the process of evolution on this mini-speck in the universe has taken about 4.5 billion years. The movement from no life to life happened about 3.8 billion years ago, from life to human thought a mere 2.5 million years ago, and since then we've moved from human thought to love. The point at which Adam and Eve became capable of making free choices accelerated this human unfolding, so that now some of us actively participate in the process of evolution—are actually shaping its future. As intelligence increased, groups of our ancestors created over 7,000 different languages that are still being spoken. The thousands of ethnic cultures who spoke those languages developed separately over centuries. The languages and cultures formed gradually by encounters with the natural world, through growing awareness of the mysteries of their bodies and inner lives, and through communication between each other. At first, these very distinct cultures began to slowly connect.

For a few thousand years now, Earth's ethnic cultures have been increasingly engaging one another spurred by technological advancement. Through animal domestication, ship-building, the invention of airplanes and electronics, a gradual mixing process has been bringing cultures face-

to-face with each other's very different ways of surviving and thriving. The best of human decisions have been moving human collaboration forward, from hunting in packs to intimate healing and loving communities. The current frontier of the evolutionary process seems to be in-depth communication within small groups of care and learning conducted for the betterment of humanity.

Four particular features of world cultures have spurred their development and lend themselves to evaluating the use of new technologies: (1) *interpersonal care*—the growing care and love in relationships between individuals; (2) *communal healing*—collaborative relationships in communities of others; (3) relationships with *obvious transcendence*; and, (4) an evolving capacity for individual *self-explorative reflection*. Using their newfound freedom, humans have increasingly reflected on themselves, their relationships with one another, their gatherings and belonging, and their purpose relative to what is beyond. Following is an exploration of what each of these features reveal about the adaptation of electronic transmission for clinical education.

### *Interpersonal Care*

A central aspect of all great religions, as they continue to develop, is empathy and concern for the difficulties pertinent to evolving humans—the pain and struggles of one another—variously called agape love, charity, or ministry in Christian terms. The teachings of Jesus on the essential goodness of all humans, the idea of Transcendent Power as benignly parental, and the value of caring for one another still stand as the most influential examples of interpersonal care in the western world.

Clinical pastoral education, a Christian breakthrough of the twentieth century, has featured growing excellence in ministry care through small group dynamics, close examination of actual efforts at pastoral care, face-to-face encounters, and the facilitation of self-exploration in contexts of authenticity among peer learners. The success of these methods raises questions about the new technology's role:

- Can active care and prescriptive confrontation through electronic media be felt emotionally on a sufficiently palpable level to supply interpersonal experiences that are transformational?
- It is possible that such experiences between supervisors and group members, as well as among students, could facilitate radical change in perspectives, identities, and professional functioning.

- Will the intensity of interpersonal challenge be accomplished regularly enough to sustain the essential value of the encounter to educational change that has characterized group peer supervision in its first 80 years?

### *Communal Healing*

The compilation of written wisdom gathered and taught by Hebrew spiritual leaders—the Old Testament—stands as an example of humanity's growing awareness that gatherings of people enhance human living. Mobs, gangs, and armies have demonstrated the opposite, as well, showing a potential for evil that continues to grow; although it is intertwined with the evolution of love. The Ten Commandments has become a model of the early efforts of wise thinkers to curtail evil and promote love.

Hebrew thinkers could see that honoring the truth and personal property spawned trust (7, 8 & 10); practicing mercy rather than violence contributed to peace (5); reverence for romantic love and family relationships as sacred reduced chaos (3, 4, 6 & 9); and communally acknowledging a positive single "Greatest Power" injected hope into the "chosen people's" everyday lives (1 & 2).

Christianity followed with the teaching that *all people* are chosen and are seen by the Deity with delight and that gathering together to express that conviction further opens everyone to inspiration. As history has shown, in a few hundred years the enthusiasm for communal life spread to encompass nearly all of humanity.

By the twentieth century in the western world, however, the practical use of the spiritual power of communal care had become eroded. This caused several men and women who were struggling with alcoholism in the 1930s to decide to re-fashion Christian-principled group healing, apart from church culture, and find a way to live in sobriety. This marvelous community called itself Alcoholics Anonymous and once again the beauty of what gut-level communal care can offer for growth and healing was re-born.

A decade earlier, clinical pastoral educators had done the same thing, but quietly and within theological and health care circles, employing group dynamics to enhance human development, increase caring skills, and heal dysfunctional communication patterns—in the process, increasing competency in ministry and pastoral care.

### *Obvious Transcendence*

Virtually all cultures have named, personified, imagined, or conceptualized the Transcendent power that brings the unstoppable rain and eventually

takes all living things away. Over the centuries, wise spiritual geniuses—such as shamans and prophets—created and compiled practices, rituals, stories, and beliefs that have guided billions of lives in meeting the challenges and disasters that comprise our fragile existence—all five great religions provide examples.

Transcendence is, perhaps, most obvious in the natural world and in corporal intimacy between two lovers. When compared with the idea of “distance loving,” the limitations of “distance-learning” become clear—rich expressions of affection, interpersonal engagement, and bodily expression are not possible. The simplicity of children making sense of the Beyond through experiencing thunderstorms or the death of a loved one; or the way that adolescents grow intellectually, in spite of the fire of youthful sexuality, can become examples for adults seeking to care for other people’s souls.

Dedication to the core beliefs and practices that shape any person’s life path runs deep and operates with incredible influence and resilience. Religious and spiritual convictions ground lives and direct them. Wars continue to be fought because of the differences in how we see the Divine. Now humanity has evolved to a place where efforts to change one another’s core commitments need to give way to mutual exploration, understanding, empathy, and collaboration towards humanity’s broader goals.

The group aspect of clinical supervision arguably remains the most successful and profoundly appreciated ecumenical movement now in use among practitioners of differing spiritual systems. Peer supervision thrives on focusing first on personal needs of people and only secondarily on ministers’ sharing fundamental religious or spiritual beliefs. Group interactions regarding religious/spiritual convictions relative to patient care can be some of the most intimate, perilous, and life re-shaping interactions that takes place in peer supervision.

Before we alter the successful system already in place, we need to resolve the following questions:

- Can a new technology contribute to this unique arena for promoting inter-religious collaboration?
- Does the use of this technology keep discussion of core beliefs and practices cognitive, defensive, and shallow?
- Will students’ working to shape deep presentations of their spiritual beliefs for electronic transmission truncate soul-level processing and re-consider-

ation of theological stances, assumptions, doubts, and ideological incongruence that ground a person's care of others?

Academia's evaluations of distance-learning include recognition that persons become objectified to a certain degree when relating through material media.<sup>17</sup> Careful observation and evaluation of distance-supervision experiments will be vital in charting the future of the use of electronic media for some educational functions, including the processing of theological and spiritual core values relative to pastoral care work.

### *Self-explorative Reflection*

The nineteenth-century breakthrough discovery of the unconscious self—revealing that much of what makes up human personality is beyond our awareness—brought a new depth to human evolution. The concept of the unconscious moved human self-understanding beyond virtue and morality. It made possible the ability to pay attention to subtleties of interpersonal communication as clues to deeper understandings of our own motivation, human development, and whatever impedes the intimacy we all crave.

This discovery of the human unconscious, and subsequent refinements, increased interpersonal and group self-understanding and grounded the creation of clinical supervision. Ingenious individuals, intent on improving care, devised simple, solid structures and processes for taking student caregivers through their own unconscious depths. This personal exploration prepares students to compassionately enter other people's lives to ease their suffering by improving their self-understanding, self-compassion, and ability to relate to others.

Uses of technological developments that enhance the process of self-reflection can become an addition to the established methods that have made clinical supervision the best educational process for promoting personal and professional integration yet devised. At the same time, flashy uses of technology that focus a learner's attention on creating a positive appearance need to be limited. A learner may be distracted from intentional focus on subtle clues about their own, or others, inner processes or interpersonal feedback that might increase the student's self-awareness could be weakened.

One questions to ask is: Can group learning and healing be as rich when the relationships are conducted only through electronic methods? In the recovering alcoholic community a phone call may at times help a struggling person refrain from relapse temporarily, but the need to "go to a meet-

ing," to actually be in the same room as one's communal Higher Power will surely follow soon. Perhaps actual personal presence is equally indispensable in peer supervision.

Group peer supervision can be augmented by electronic transmission of images, but will not be supplanted by it. The use of parallel processes has pervaded excellent supervision. How group processes tend to mirror patient-care efforts in a peer group presentation provides some of the best data in integrative clinical learning. In distance-supervision, even if all students and the supervisor can view one another on screens, the need for simultaneously observing those images while looking within oneself for salient inner processes—memories, emotions, attitudes, and assumptions—enormously complicates the process of learning in a group context. Group relating in a shared, physical space may be required—and electronic transmissions can provide augmentation.

#### THE PLACE OF DISTANCE-EDUCATION IN CLINICAL SUPERVISION

At this point in the evolution of clinical supervision, some limitations can be suggested as experimentation takes place. Supervisors responsible for distance clinical pastoral education will need to ground the educational rationale of programs in *theoretical concepts* that sufficiently relate supervisory practice to current CPE standards. Accrediting agencies could make provisions to approve experimental programs using distance-educational methods temporarily for the purpose of *expanding the reach of pastoral supervision*. CPE programs that experiment with distance-education will need to *evaluate* these educational methods, particularly those involving clinical and process group sessions. If a CPE program experiments with distance-education methods, program evaluations will need to include a section eliciting student and supervisor appraisal of those methods. This practice will contribute to the development and amendment of CPE standards.

Clinical and interpersonal group sessions, as well as individual supervisory sessions, will need to allow for *two-way interactions* and only be used to augment the supervisory relationship established previously through face-to-face interaction. Clear guidelines and standards will be needed to identify percentages of clinical and interpersonal group sessions and individual supervisory sessions that need to be conducted in person. Also, accrediting agencies who authorize programs conducted outside of the Unit-

ed States will need to develop guidelines for the use of distance-education methods to maintain the quality of pastoral supervision.

#### NOTES

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