

Making the Connection: A Case Study on Bridging Classroom and Experiential Learning

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Abstract: This article describes a 9-month longitudinal study, which in part examined how seminary students (N=60) connect classroom learning with field education experiences. Findings indicate that many students began field education either underestimating the connections between their courses and ministry in the field or overestimating their ability to move between theory and practice. Over time, students gained a deeper appreciation of the nuanced connections between classroom and experiential learning. Some students emerged from this deeper sense of connection disillusioned by disconnects between real-life ministry and their classroom learning. This disillusionment is important for educators to expect, understand, and address.

Classroom Connections: A Field Education Dilemma

During a previous research project, I studied the classroom components of a number of theological field education programs across the country. Many program documents used the term “integration” when describing the goals of on-campus courses related to field education. Furthermore, all field education directors queried expressed a commitment to maintaining a vibrant connection between field education and the rest of their respective schools’ curriculum. Both of these findings left me hoping to learn more for the benefit of the field education program at my own institution, which I direct as part of my role as Associate Dean. For providing “integration” was one of our many promises as a program, yet our program seemed to be connected to the wider Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Religious Education only on paper.

The seminary I serve has a historic and respected field education program dating back to the 1970s. For many years the program included an on-campus course entitled “Practicum,” where members of the faculty, in conjunction with local ministers, would lead discussion groups on campus for students in field education. By attrition, and over time, faculty members pulled back from teaching Practicum, and teams of pastors led discussions without faculty input. By the time I arrived as the program’s director, those teams had been halved due to budget constraints.

When I met with the team of Practicum-leading pastors for the first time, I asked the group to reflect on the purpose of the on-campus discussion groups. The first to respond said, “The integration of theory and practice.” This echoed many program documents. Yet the teaching team for Practicum had no faculty involvement, leaving me to wonder, “Integrating what with what?” For where was the “theory” students were to discuss with one another and a local pastor?

Over the course of a two-year study, 2005-2007, I learned that valuable reflection and colleague support took place in the Practicum context, and I was determined not to allow students to lose these important resources. But I also became interested in what it

would mean to live into the promise to promote the integration of theory and practice. This article will describe what I learned in that exploration through the following steps:

- Examining the way in which professional education separates and connects “theory and practice.”
- Describing the new course I designed at my school to promote the integration of classroom and experiential learning.
- Presenting the findings of an research project meant to, among other goals, create new understanding about how students connect classroom learning with experience in field education, and finally
- Offering a case study, based in this research, on how students go about connecting their learning from the seminary classroom and the ministry setting, and how instructors can promote more robust integration between the two settings.

The Theory/Practice Split: A False Dichotomy

In an article entitled “Four Pedagogical Mistakes: A Mea Culpa” (Farley, 2005), theologian Edward Farley presents four ways in which he, in his own seminary teaching, promoted needless separations between theology and the practice of ministry:

1. Mistake #1: Farley writes that he was wrong to have believed that “[t]heology in its primary meaning is an academic pursuit, a phenomenon of scholarship” (p. 201). Were that true, he writes, “to teach theology as an academic field would have obsolescence built into it” (p. 201).
2. Mistake #2: Farley believes no longer that “[t]he primary skill of (academic) theology is to apprehend the meaning of written texts” (p. 201). He now writes that the Christian tradition was not originally captured in books, and therefore its future cannot lie in this discipline of understanding books alone.
3. Mistake #3: He writes that to believe that the primary function of teaching theology is transmitting doctrine indicates a lack of understanding of the fundamentally idolatrous nature of doctrine itself.¹
4. Mistake #4: Farley expresses regret at having long believed that “[t]he teaching of theology is compromised or corrupted when it concerns itself with the situations of human life and history” (p. 201).

The needless separation of theory and practice described particularly in what Farley calls his fourth pedagogical mistake is by no means unique to theological education. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974; 1987), widely respected as scholars in the area of professional education, argue in many of their writings that separations between learning theoretical concepts and learning areas of practice are constructed at best. They write,

¹ Fascinating as it is, I do not choose in the context of this article to “take on” this particular “mistake.”

Professionals and professional educators – indeed, practitioners of all sorts – often speak of practicing and learning skills as though these activities were of an entirely different sort than learning a theory or learning to apply a theory. This viewpoint suggests that skill learning and theory learning are different kinds of activities; it suggests further that theory learning may be appropriately undertaken in one kind of place (school) and skill learning in another (work). (1974, p. 12)

Argyris and Schön argue that the setting where divisions between theory and practice—or what they call skill learning and theory learning, or what I have begun to refer to as classroom learning and experiential learning – can best be addressed is the “reflective practicum.” Schön (1987) describes that setting this way:

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real-world work. They learn by undertaking projects that simulate and simplify practice; or they take on real-world projects under close supervision. The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers. It stands in an intermediate space between the practice world, the “lay” world of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy. It is also a collective world in its own right, with its own mix of materials, tools, languages, and appreciations. It embodies particular ways of seeing, thinking, and doing that tend, over time, as far as the student is concerned, to assert themselves with increasing authority. (p. 37)

Schön goes on to write that what one might call the “ingredients” of a reflective practicum are (1) a student who is learning by doing, (2) a coach with professional experience and a capacity to reflect, and (3) student peers engaged in a similar learning-by-doing endeavor. Clearly, the Practicum course that existed at my institution upon my arrival met all of these expectations. Where the course fell short relates to Argyris and Schön’s proposals for institutions of professional learning. For they argue that a school can only claim to prepare students for professional competence if it actively promotes lowering or removing false barriers between theory and practice (1974). They name forces of resistance that make such a change difficult, if not impossible, such as nettlesome administrative problems related to credit and requirements, cultural mismatches between field experience and the academy, definition of students’ responsibility, and the unclear relationship between supervised practice and the rest of a curriculum. The highest hurdle they name, however, is the faculty of most institutions of professional learning: “Faculty tend to resist the intrusion of field work into the curriculum, or, at any rate, tend to carry on the academic program parallel to field work as though the latter did not exist” (p. 187).

As I began to consider ways in which a true Practicum, with a meaningful connection to the curriculum as a whole, might take shape in my own institution, I realized quickly that I had two assets with which to work that not all schools could claim.

First, because our School is located in a part of the country where many ministers has a high level of education and commitment to scholarship, I knew that it would be possible, through recruitment and retention, to create a team of teachers who would embody the ideal presented here by Argyris and Schön (1974):

There is a way that one can bring the part-time, successful practitioner into this model, in a way that would be profitable to the practitioner, to the students, and to the school. The strategy would be to find practitioners who want to become more skilled at being reflective about their actions and to increase their competence in creating their own theories of effective practice. (p. 192)

A second asset lies in the faculty, of which I am a member, at my own particular School. Our current faculty is unusually committed to the life of the church, in that nearly all are ordained ministers and have chosen to serve a seminary that calls itself “A School of the Church.” Argyris and Schön (1974) write that “internal commitment of faculty members will not tend to be high unless they are centrally interested in studying these learning processes, whether simulated or in the field” (p. 193). I was confident that our particular faculty was internally committed to making sure that its collective teaching is relevant to service in the church. I believed that we could find a way to live into our promise of “integrating theory and practice” through my working with the faculty to create a reflective practicum that included them while also providing students with peer reflection and coaching from an experienced practitioner of ministry.

P3 and Journey Mapping: A New Program and Related Research Project

After a year of study and design, our School launched the Professor-Practitioner Program (nicknamed “P3”) as the new form for “Practicum” in field education. Here is a brief summary of the structure of that course:

- Seven or eight courses each semester were given a “P3” designation in the course catalogue.
- P3 courses were taught by faculty members, but each one had a “Resident Ministry Practitioner” (or “RMP”) in the course, working with the Professor in class to describe the implications of the learnings in the classroom for the work of ministry. Different Professor/RMP teams found different ways to work together. In some cases, Professors gave RMPs 15 minutes to respond at the end of each lecture. In other cases, the Professors and RMPs co-led discussion.
- Either directly before or after the course meeting time, the RMP met with between 6-8 students who were both taking the P3-designated course and engaged in field education. During those 90-minute breakout sessions, two main activities took place: (1) A group check-in about field education facilitated by the RMP and (2) an “integrative exercise” presentation where one student shared with the group some reflections on where she or he was seeing (or failing to see) connections between the P3-designated course and the learning of field education.

- Students registered for one P3 course and section in each of their two required concurrent semesters of field education. All students changed groups at the mid-year because no year-long courses had P3 designations.

P3-designated courses included a variety of subjects, ranging from Christian Education, to preaching, to New Testament: Parables, to the theology of atonement. All were taught by full-time (rather than adjunct) faculty members who attended, in conjunction with RMPs, a training event at the beginning of the academic year. RMPs included local ministers who met the following qualifications: earned doctorates in ministry, teaching experience, current positions in ministry, overall (but not uncritical) joy in the field of ministry.

Concurrently with this first year of P3, I conducted a research project in order to learn, among other questions, the way in which students grew in their ability to connect classroom learning with their field education experiences. Through the online data collection tool “Journey Mapping,” I, with the help of research designer Barry Kibel (who created the Web site in question), created a setting online where I could monitor students’ growth throughout the P3 academic year.

As part of their requirements in P3, students were expected to make one entry in Journey Mapping per month. The guiding questions for these entries were designed with the help of the following research questions, which were adapted into more “user-friendly” questions by the Web designer:

1. Are students learning to better “think theologically” about ministry and use theological language to describe ministry challenges?
2. Are students connecting coursework with ministry, or moving back and forth between ministry practice and ministry theory, in a meaningful and agile manner?
3. Are students developing habits for seeking the input, support, and perspective of colleagues and mentors?
4. Are students developing good practices of honoring processes and attending to the administrative duties related to ministry professionalism?
5. Are students growing in their ability to describe their faith convictions and sense of calling?
6. Are students developing a theologically reflective practice of ministry, where they consider God’s role and purpose in the events of their ministries?
7. Are students gaining ministry experience and being afforded a wide array of opportunities to learn?
8. Are students growing in their congruence (or authenticity) and confidence as relates to their ministerial identity?

60 students participated in this study. Not all were faithful to the once-per-month expectation, but all students in the program did participate. Only a small number of

students (~6 per semester) received warnings for low participation, which indicates that approximately 90% of participants entered their experiences in Journey Mapping eight times over the course of their P3 experiences. Once I collected all the data submitted over the course of the 2007-2008 academic year, I used the qualitative research software N*Vivo to analyze it. N*Vivo makes it possible for a researcher to assign “codes” to large sets of qualitative data, sifting out responses related to particular points of interest the researcher wants to track. Based on the research questions, I developed the following set of codes:

1. Articulate Calling
2. Authentic Ministerial Identity
3. Colleague Input
4. Coursework Connections
5. Describe Faith
6. God In The Mix
7. Honoring Processes
8. Mentoring from RMP
9. Ministry Opportunities Thinking Theologically

In this article, I will present findings related to data that I coded under number 4 above, “Coursework Connections.” Even though there was a specific question in Journey Mapping to which students responded relating to how students perceived they were moving intellectually from the classroom into the field education setting and back again, many students made coursework connections throughout their entries.

Findings From Coursework Connections

Of the 60 respondents included in this study, some reported at the beginning of the academic year that they found it easy to connect classroom learning with their work in field education, and others described less comfort at making connections. Almost all students, even those who expressed great confidence at first in their abilities in connecting classroom with experiential learning, later on described growth. Here are three examples of students who began feeling fairly confident and still reported a sense of growth and improvement:²

[Moving between classroom learning and ministry practice] becomes easier as time passes. Just this week I was involved in a discussion that involved the lack of

² Please note that the only changes I made to student entries was to correct typographical errors; Journey Mapping has no spell check function!

growth within the greater church. This was spurred by the knowledge that only four new people had joined my field site over this past year.

As the field education continues, I find that I notice more of the theory being played out. Currently, my site church is planning some changes in church operations – including a name change and some physical changes in the worship area. Several of these are good examples of elements in ministry practice that come from studies such as [an author from the student's P3 course]'s work about successful churches. The challenges seem to be not only to use current ministry theory (emergent church ideas etc) when change is needed but also to recognize older practices that DO work and be able to blend the two.

Up until recently I had found it challenging to incorporate Parables into my field ed work. There have been resources from other classes that I have been able to rely on but I have been struggling to relate parables to any situations I have encountered. That is until this past week when we performed a baptism outside of service. These were people who did not attend church but wanted to have their child baptized. In my reflection I noted that I felt the absence of God and found myself asking why we were performing the baptism if it was only for a Kodak moment. To make a long story short, in the end I found myself thinking of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. I found myself relating to the Pharisee as I was not focused on the sacrament and its meaning, God's unconditional love and grace.

Some students reported, especially at the beginning of each term, that they did not expect to find any connection between their P3 courses and field education. Some of those students found themselves surprised at the connections they did find:

I am finding the connections between the classes and the experience more similar than I anticipated. Two examples come to mind immediately: 1. in history we are learning how understanding the weave of culture and faith/belief effect and affect the adaptability of Christianity to people's lives. What I see in practice is whether it is understanding life circumstances of people's familial roots and 2. the language and symbols tied into the expressions of meaning we can still have a collision of cultures and create a Christianity that misses the reality of life. The second example is the incredible spirit of the human and our drive for meaning. The weaving of the deepest wells of our daily experiences of being fully present to each other is an opportunity to see God by any name and share these stories as we continue to become both Christian and human.

Another student writes,

I am working on the theories around congregational life and growth. Reading all these books on how churches grow is one thing. To go out and talk to the pastors who are leading these churches is a whole different experience. They have earned their stripes, so to speak. Their stories are fascinating. Sometimes it is easier to

see the experience and then work backwards to the theory and see where the experience works with the theory and where it doesn't.

As students moved more deeply into the connections between their coursework and their field education experiences, they discovered areas of dissonance and rupture, where the academy had not lived up to its claim that it was preparing students to lead in the church, and where the church did not attain the ideals taught in students' courses. This disjuncture led, for many students, to a sense of either discomfort or disillusionment.

Last semester I was taking a history class and was surprised to learn the many ways in which issues that the church dealt with things in the past are still factors today. This semester I am taking a course on program planning and leadership in which many of the things I am learning about are problems in the church, so it is applicable, but more anxiety-producing. One example of this is a situation with some staff at the church who are also members and doing things in a 1950's sort of way and no one wants to address it. I find myself seeing both sides.

I am observing that the theory and practice of congregational ministry are two different creatures. For example, our readings speak of such practices as hospitality, and our churches pride themselves in it. And yet our practice of hospitality is clearly lacking, as was evident on a recent interfaith Sunday in which an invited imam's children were left in the cold at coffee hour while the rest of the congregation engaged in animated discussion.

I am more ambivalent about the modern church, especially after just reading American congregations. We are mediating structures, go betweens, especially in the white middle class, and our churches embody the segregation, individualism, and separation inherent in the system.

Theologically I am taught to study and discern beliefs and behaviors around ethics, peace, and justice. But in practice the church I serve has deep financial needs. All energies seem to be about survival. How is there extra time and inner strength for ethical wrestling?

Perhaps the student who summarized best the interpretations students offered for their newly-discovered abilities to connect classroom and experiential learning wrote, "Practice and theory overlap well but not always in predictable ways."

Analysis and Implications for Practice

As a field education program director, and the coordinator for P3, student entries in Journey Mapping provided many helpful insights about the effectiveness of the program. For example, many have asked me if students in "practical disciplines" (such as Ministerial Leadership and Preaching) found it easier to make connections between the classroom and field education than those in P3 courses in "classical disciplines" (History, Theology, or Bible). Students, in fact, seemed to assume at the beginning of the first semester that this would be the case.

Ultimately, there appeared to be no significant difference between students' abilities to make connections based on disciplines in themselves; just as many students commented on making connections between their P3 preaching course and field education as commented about US Christian History. It appears, however, that students were able to make connections more easily in courses where the RMP was integrally involved in the actual course, not just the break-out section. The faculty member's willingness to include the RMP in course time seems to have gone a long way toward helping students to see the practical, ministerial relevance of their courses, no matter how practical or abstract the course topic.

The most important findings to emerge from this 9-month longitudinal study of an integration focused course relate to how, over time, students make connections. In order to help students to integrate classroom and experiential learning we must understand to the greatest extent possible what the integration process is like for students, and what kinds of support help the student to make such connections. This study exposed a pattern that seemed to affect most students in some way:

1. First, at the beginning of the first semester, some students expressed confidence that they "already" know how to make connections between classroom and experiential learning. Others described what I would call "confidence in their incapacity:" a strong sense that they would be unable to make such connections for one reason or another. A few students stated that they did not understand the distinction between the two forms of learning, and others said that they felt their P3-designated course was too unrelated to the work of ministry for such connections to exist. In either case, those in the latter category expressed little hope that connections would be uncovered.
2. Over the course of the year, students in both categories (both confident and confident in their incapacity), began to see connections or to see them more clearly. By intentionally using their P3 designated courses as a "lens" for looking at their field education settings, they began to see theory come to life.
3. As students developed that ability to turn the coursework "lens" onto their ministry settings, they began to do the same with other courses, including those without P3 designations and courses taken in previous semesters. Over the course of the year, more and more students began to point to ways in which they were applying learnings from other courses, not related to P3, in field education.
4. With greater ability to move with agility between classroom learning and the experience of ministry, many students found themselves unexpectedly disillusioned. They saw ways in which theory presents ideal cases to which the church does not always live up. They also saw ways in which the academy was unrealistic about what the church is today. With greater depth of learning, students found themselves in a richer but less comfortable frame of mind when connecting classroom and experiential learning.

The question that this fourth phase, “disillusionment,” presents to educators is this: How can we help students to see disjuncture between lived experience and classroom learning as a rallying cry? One RMP wrote to me over the course of the year about her students’ experience in a P3-designated course on atonement. Students in the course, when using atonement as a lens for understanding their field education settings, began to see the extent to which scapegoating is part of the daily life of faith communities. This left many of them both inspired at the joy of discovery and raw at the stark nature of that discovery. Such discomfort can be a great motivator to reform the church and seminary education if nurtured with care and wisdom by teachers who anticipate it and help students to recognize their current and future role in bringing about positive change.

Educators who work with students engaged in both classroom and field education, such as practicum leaders or RMPs, must anticipate these patterns and be prepared to relate to students experiencing disillusionment. Students who reflect upon the disconnection between the church itself and classroom teachings about the church might make one of two possible conclusions: (1) the church is broken beyond repair, or (2) that the course is not relevant to practice. Instructors who anticipate disillusionment and prepare for these possible black-and-white conclusions can help students themselves to become prepared for the disconnects inherent in integrating classroom and experiential learning. They can begin their instruction in a practicum-style teaching setting by saying something like this:

At first, you might not see the connections between your learning on campus and your learning in the field. This is normal, and over time the connections will become clearer if you train your eye to look for them. When you start to find connections, that might feel satisfying, and when you see disconnection – when one or the other institution doesn’t seem to be living up to its promises – you might feel discouraged. This is why we come together, so that we might share our observations and turn our discouragement into plans for action in our ministries.

Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is one that might have been assumed from the beginning: Students do improve in their ability to make connections between theory and practice over time when they give intentional effort toward that task. Nearly all students reported that making connections became easier for them over the course of the year, suggesting that none of them was “born” able to move from theory to practice. This is an important finding considering how many seminaries still embrace a model where students learn theory first (classroom learning for three years), then experience ministry afterward (internship at the end of seminary), and then enter ministry. This finding affirms that field education programs that are concurrent with coursework not only help students to learn the arts of ministry with the help of theory but actually help to enrich their theoretical learning.

P3 was a practical course structure at our seminary, but to pretend that its introduction was not at least in some ways meant to be subversive would be dishonest. Schön (1987) writes,

[A] reflective practicum can become a first step toward remaking the larger curriculum. The base of faculty participation can be broadened. The thrust of the experiment can be sustained even in the face of the discontinuities inherent in academic life. The development of a reflective practicum can join with new forms of research on practice, and education for it, to take on a momentum – even a contagion – of its own. (p. 343)

The hope of integrative seminars like the one included in P3 can help not just to prepare leaders for the church. It also has the capacity, in a catalytic way, to reform the academy by placing practice at the center of conversation, and to reform the church by infusing it with the most current and creative knowledge that can help it to grow in the future.

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