Overcoming Distance and Time: Online Supervisor Training in Contextual Education Programs

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At the 2007 annual meeting of Presbyterian and Reformed Theological Field Educators (known by the awkward acronym, PRTFE (pronounced "prit'fee"), there was passionate conversation about a disturbing trend emerging at the 16 seminaries represented in this collaboration. Each school is struggling to find ways to develop and nurture excellent supervisors and mentors for our interns. For multiple reasons, increasing numbers of our supervisors are receiving inadequate, or no, orientation to our contextual education programs. Because a significant number of our students engage in internships beyond commuting range of their respective seminaries, travel to an on-campus orientation with their supervisors is difficult and expensive. Other supervisors simply cannot find enough time in their schedules to commit to a multi-day training event. This trend is clearly impacting the quality of supervision our students receive, with the result that the internship experience does not maximize the potential benefits for pastoral formation.

Clearly, many current ways of doing supervisory business are not adequate given the realities of distance, time, and *ethos* of today's supervisors. Adult learners are increasingly expecting flexible educational formats. Furthermore, field educators who have the task of equipping supervisors for their work find that traditional pedagogies, limited budgets, and increased workloads often make old models of orienting supervisors untenable. By the end of the PRTFE meeting in January, 2009, we determined that an alternative delivery system for supervisor orientation was going to be our next major collaborative undertaking.

In a grant proposal to the Committee on Theological Education (COTE) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we wrote:

> PRTFE members are eager to design what will be the first online field education supervisor orientation, one that will allow all our site supervisors to receive the preparation they need, no matter how far from our seminary they may be located. Further, this project will result in an orientation with content that represents the best practices in supervisor training drawn from our fifteen seminaries.

To our delight, COTE responded enthusiastically, valuing both the rationale for the grant proposal and PRTFE's commitment to collaborative work among our seminaries.

Planning for such an ambitious collaborative venture required intense work sessions during two meetings of the PRTFE caucus in 2009. During that time, PRTFE wrestled with questions that are inherent to online pedagogy:

1. Who is our audience? Supervisors, certainly, but how comfortable will they be with this kind of technology?

2. What technology will the supervisors have at their disposal? Some of our supervisors are in rural areas that are limited to dial-up modems. Some do not have computers.

3. Are we expecting this online delivery system to provide ALL the content necessary to ensure base-level competency for supervisors who cannot get to campus?

4. Will we be able to develop base-line modules on key content that will be applicable for and accepted by all our seminaries?

5. What constitutes base-line competence?

6. How long should each "module" take to complete? How will we know if the supervisor completes the module?

7. Will experienced supervisors be able to benefit from the online platform we develop?

8. Where will we lodge this online platform so that it is accessible by all seminaries?

9. Given that online pedagogy differs from face-to-face pedagogy, do we have enough competence within our cohort to design online learning modules?

10. How ominous is it that the project director can't get the data projector to work during our first meeting?

Over the course of a year, a design team of four of our members took the insights, questions, and module-content suggestions from the caucus meeting and shaped, and reshaped, an online design and pedagogy. Of primary concern to the team was the identification of a theological motif to serve as a unifying thread throughout each module. What is foundational to our understanding of the web of relationships central to our discipline and to this project? Intentional, extended reflection on this question led us to covenant.

The theme of 'covenant' clearly reflects a theological perspective common in the Calvinist tradition. We have sought to make this theology visible in the design of our syllabi for field education in the past. How would it translate into shaping an online course for the future? What are the implications of covenantal theology for content, design, expectations, and accessibility issues? How do we convey our commitment to the covenantal

connections between seminary, student, supervisor, congregation, and denominational affiliations when digital technology makes distance easier and cultural trends foster increasingly diverse expectations and learning patterns? These questions remain at the forefront of our work together.

Along the way, we have learned valuable lessons. First, technology keeps changing. What seems like the outer limits of possibility for technology today may appear as obsolete as eight-track tapes tomorrow. Our original concept for where to lodge this shared online orientation now seems laughable. Suffice it to say that, today, the site is housed on a free blog site, in our case, WordPress (www.wordpress.org). PRTFE members can access the site easily and administrative privileges can be granted as needed (and as wanted!). Editing the site is simple, which is essential given the wealth of relevant websites, podcasts, and videos that are being developed. One does not have to understand HyperText Markup Language (HTML) to develop a highly functional, helpful site.

Secondly, we have been on a steep learning curve about what resources are available for online teaching in general and for supervision in particular. One member of the design team did have some basic training in online teaching, but the three-year gap between that training and this project confirmed the speed with which technology moves. Who knew that YouTube has some excellent resources on mentoring? What is the video attention span for the average online learner? What is the best way to use PowerPoint online? What if a student doesn't have the software to open a PowerPoint presentation? Will we be able to employ some form of video-conferencing platform? And on it goes...

Unexpected benefits have surprised and excited us. What began as a dream to ensure that those supervisors at a distance or those challenged by time could be equipped for supervision is actually becoming a tool that will serve ALL supervisors well. Not only is the base-line level material provided for each online module we have developed useful for all supervisors, but a separate area is also available with more advanced materials for experienced supervisors.

PRTFE colleagues are making plans to use this online supervisor training not only as a distance-learning tool, but also in a hybrid format. Some of us who still have some supervisors able to attend on-campus training are considering asking those participants to work through parts of the online modules prior to coming to campus. This advance preparation will allow us to maximize our face-to-face time with supervisors, giving us valuable time to engage at a much deeper level with these on-site partners-in-ministry.

As of this writing, the first of approximately seven modules is complete, and the content for the others is well under way. PRTFE debuted the project and the completed module at the January, 2011 biennial meeting of the Association for Theological Field Education and it was received with enthusiasm, confirming what has motivated us from the beginning: 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.

Perhaps "together" is the operative word. Some of us may have neither the proclivity nor the desire to become technologically proficient. But good colleagues, who know how to dream big, work hard, and laugh till it hurts, can make that huge learning curve look much less intimidating. This is still a work-in-progress, but once the work is complete, we will be happy to share it with everyone. Simply contact us at the email addresses below.

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