

Field Education and Critical Pedagogy: A Conversation

Barbara J. Blodgett

As I write this, the learning agreements for next year's field education interns are starting to fill my in-box. I find myself bracing for what I will find there. Learning agreements are, of course, the documents created by student interns and their supervisors, outlining their learning goals and the tasks they will undertake to reach them. I take delight in well-crafted agreements, in novel and thoughtfully articulated goals. Most of the time, however, agreements are similar from year to year, and some of the goals are very predictable. Over the last decade, there are two common goals: (a) learn how to maintain proper boundaries and (b) adopt strategies for self-care. I believe boundaries and self-care are important, but I am increasingly frustrated by what seems to be the top two learning goals of a generation. Sometimes, these aims dominate the landscape of field education as well. Are clear boundaries and self-care the criteria for pastoral identity today? What happened to other meanings, like pastor as leader or change agent?¹

Barbara J. Blodgett, M. Div., Ph.D., director of Supervised Ministries, Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect St., New Haven, CT, 06511(E-mail: barbara.blodgett@yale.edu).

TRANSFORMING UNDERSTANDING OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

When pastoral supervisors tell me what being a pastor means to them, I am relieved. In them I find people whose pastoral identity is multifaceted and robust. Even so, our conversations reflect the same preoccupations. Supervising pastors are determined to teach their student interns to maintain better boundaries and practice better self-care than they do. Thus, I do not blame my students for setting the goals they do. They are simply responding to warnings that the ministry profession is toxic and its practitioners had better learn how to protect themselves. I long for conversations with students and supervisors about why and how the profession got poisoned this way—if it really has—and what we collectively could do to transform ministry.

The transformation of ministry is beyond my scope as a field educator. However, I keep asking whether there might be something I could do to shake students from their preoccupations with the way things are and get them thinking about the way things could be. More importantly, I wonder what my role is with respect to this apparent lacuna. As frustrated as I might be with the reigning metaphors for ministry today, I am equally frustrated that my own pedagogies fail to challenge them. What might I do to create a little discontent with the assumption that ministry is a toxic or dangerous enterprise from which its practitioners must be protected? If there is a crisis, is it not at least in part an educational crisis? Should we not be as concerned to produce new ministers willing and equipped to transform the profession, and not just produce ministers suitably formed for it? Could our goal as educators be to raise up a generation that will not settle for ministry as it is?

These questions have prompted me to explore the literature on critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogues, or critical theorists, see the purpose of education as not only preparing students for the world as it is, but also empowering them to create the world as it should be. They are concerned about the kind of leaders and change agents schools are producing. Although the focus of critical pedagogies is on public schooling and particularly the education of children, parallels to theological education are appropriate. Advocates of critical pedagogy are concerned that the transformative work of education in public schooling gets subsumed under preoccupation with standardized test scores and teacher performance ratings. Correspondingly, I would argue, theological educators are preoccupied with matriculating and graduating candidates who will be called or employed for ministry because they are fit for work in the

churches. This emphasis may prevent us from playing a transformative role in defining what counts as fitness for pastoral work in the first place.

This essay brings these two discourses together: critical pedagogy and field education. I will take up three key ideas of critical theory—identifying the political dimensions of education, exposing constructed consciousness, and adopting constructivist teaching. Throughout, I will address one question: how might we form and transform our students' understanding of what it means to be a "pastoral" minister? I will argue that, as educators, we should not uncritically accept popular definitions of pastoral identity (e.g., a caregiver who sets boundaries and cares for the self), but rather critique them, and foster educational programs to create healthy discontent and creative resistance against the consequences of critical neglect. Our teaching and learning practices themselves need reorientation if our aim is transformation as well as formation.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION

When scholars use the term "critical theory," they generally mean the legacy of theoretical work developed by members of what was called the Frankfurt School in the early decades of the twentieth century. This "school" was a group of philosophers who were all members of an institute in Frankfurt, Germany. Frankfurt School members were interested, in their words, "in the interconnections between the economic life of society, the psychic development of the individual, and transformations in the realm of culture."² They explored the concealed relationships of domination that exist under the facade of supposedly benign institutions like the economy and the state—and we would add education. As Henry Giroux describes their project:

Penetrating such appearances meant exposing through critical analysis social relationships that took on the status of things or objects. For instance, by examining notions such as money, consumption, distribution, and production, it becomes clear that none of these represents an objective thing or fact, but rather all are historically contingent contexts mediated by relationships of domination and subordination.³

Money is a good example. We may reach into our wallet and pull out a dollar bill, but money is much more a relationship than it is a thing. A dollar represents a relationship between someone who is buying and some-

one who is selling, a consumer and a producer. Similarly, public education is not a thing. Because public education is such a ubiquitous part of our culture and supported by massive institutions that it often “takes on the status of a thing,” and we forget to ask why it exists! But it, too, is defined by relationships.

In the United States, the system of public education may be traced back to the early 1800s when the common school movement arose out of a desire to see that every U.S. child receive an education. This desire was not necessarily an altruistic or disinterested one. Patricia Hinchey explains:

At a time when immigrants from various countries were flooding the United States, it was thought that if children from different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds attended the same school and interacted on a daily basis, then friction among various groups who must coexist peacefully in this democracy would be reduced....A major task of public schools has always been to produce citizens with a common core of knowledge who think of themselves as patriotic Americans and who can be financially independent of the state.⁴

In other words, “there are now and always have been social, political, and economic purposes for the establishment of schools.”⁵ Public education arose out of a specific historical and political context and still has political dimensions. Schools are not just there to provide every child their God-given right to academic knowledge. Schools exist for relational and civic purposes.

This assumption has implications for curriculum. Most of what an American child learns in school can be explained in terms of democracy and economic self-sufficiency. For example, as Hinchey points out, traditionally the public school curriculum had all children regardless of their background learning about Betsy Ross’s sewing skills and Benjamin Franklin’s maxims because such knowledge, it was believed, formed them into patriotic Americans. Even today, they learn too little about the diversity of their own heritages, the way immigration challenges the definition of American identity, or the systematic eradication of indigenous cultures (which some of them may claim), because those pieces of knowledge render patriotism complicated.

Critical theory is a useful tool for unearthing the political purposes of the curriculum hidden below the officially stated ones. It reveals carefully concealed patterns of domination and subordination. Too often, the content and practices of schooling are still designed so as to produce a compliant citizenry that votes and obeys the laws of our democracy, rather than an active citizenry that holds its leaders accountable, calls for change when necessary, and par-

ticipates in the creation of a just society. Public education is designed to produce consumers for capitalism instead of responsible and ethical economic actors. As one self-confessed critical theorist put it:

The idea that education can be deployed in ways that actually undermine students' efforts to gain socio-economic mobility and control over their lives runs counter to the lessons of [our] Sunday School teachers, scout leaders, and Mr. Rogers. Bart Simpson may be one of the few voices that disagrees with this conventional wisdom—and [our] junior high school teachers warned [us] about him.⁶

With this brief introduction to the political dimensions of public education according to critical theorists, I intend to ask similar questions of theological education in general and field education in particular. Might we as field educators be guilty of deploying education in ways that undermine efforts of students to gain control over their lives, in particular, control over what counts as pastoral work for the churches today? What are the historical and political purposes of field education? Are there patterns of dominance and submission in field education that contradict the explicit goal of preparing leaders for the future church? What relationships drive the shaping of a field education program?

THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THEOLOGICAL FIELD EDUCATION

Like any form of education, theological education is fundamentally a set of relationships. Historically it has developed out of, and in relationship to, two major social institutions—church and academy. It produces leaders for both—pastors for the churches and scholars for the advancement of the study of religion. Theological education, therefore, has dual relational purposes. Those who work in seminaries are sometimes caught in the middle. Church leaders say that seminaries have lost touch with what the people in the pews need, while academics say our teaching and learning practices are not rigorous enough.

Within theological education, field education in particular has maintained the most direct ties to the churches' needs. Field education traces its roots to the practice of "field work," whereby young, mostly male seminarians financed their education by working in churches, sometimes as pastors. This arrangement or relationship was never entirely outgrown. Field education today is still a hybrid of employment and education. There are

inherent instabilities and negative consequences to this arrangement, though there are many positive aspects as well.

For one thing, field education-as-employment either privileges large churches with the resources to pay for student placement or relegates field education opportunities to poor churches that cannot afford anyone but a student pastor. It can leave a student either without direction or directed only into areas of ministry left vacant by staff and laity. It reduces the freedom a student has to question or experiment with existing ministry practices. My proposal that students should not be paid for field work because they are also receiving academic credit has met with massive resistance. I am aware that functioning as a secondary financial aid officer undercuts significantly my attempts to position myself as an educator. Most importantly, for our purposes, when parishes are not only a field for student experience in ministry but also provide economic support, the needs of parishioners may drive the educational agenda. Thus the concealed economic purposes of the field education enterprise construct the student's educational experience. As field educators, we continue to struggle to establish ourselves as a discipline of teaching and learning against this economic purpose.

We already know how the meeting of needs can overwhelm and eventually define a professional's practice of ministry. This is the politics of ministry. Pastors are constantly reminded of "how their bread gets buttered," as one honest Presbyterian pastor recently put it. By that he meant providing enough solicitous pastoral care for his members so that they would tolerate his occasional attempts to get them to read some theology. Bread gets buttered in ministry if you know how to attract new members, come up with entertaining new ways for them to worship, raise money, keep the boiler running and the budget balanced, and manage conflict without alienating anybody. In fact, I suspect that orienting the task of ministry around the meeting of needs leads to the quiet but grudging acceptance of pastoral ministry as an ongoing bargain: if they perceive that their needs are getting met, I can get away with leading them my way. This bargain is frequently articulated in terms of a tradeoff between the "pastoral" and the "prophetic." A need-based agenda leads eventually to a preoccupation with boundaries, as ministers seek to protect themselves from the needs that threaten to engulf them!

For field educators, acquiescing to the priority of need leads to a narrow view of what we could teach and students should learn. It is no coincidence that membership growth, alternative worship styles, stewardship, financial administration, and conflict resolution are precisely the topics students want to learn more about. However, I do not wish to be misunderstood. As an educator, I am committed to the church and do not wish to ignore the needs of people in the pews as I prepare the people who will occupy pulpits. This commitment is what keeps me in field education. But neither do I want simply to turn out students who will unquestioningly accept parishioners' stated needs as the only ones to be met. In order to prepare ministers who know how to lead people by creating the social conditions necessary for a good life in their communities, we will need to resist actively the agenda of need-meeting that would otherwise constitute the basis of pastoral identity.

Therefore I argue that we must be honest about the consequences of the current political and economic arrangements of field education and work to reshape them when we can, so as not to be indebted to an agenda that constrains our students' education. Hinchey writes: "The process, then, is not about rescue; it's about empowerment...helping [students] to attain mental freedom and to develop skills necessary to make their voices heard."⁷ If our students are the future leaders of the Christian church, they need a wide range of skills to free them to do the work.

One of these skills is the ability to perceive the hidden agenda itself. Instead of merely drawing their attention elsewhere, we will want to share with them the problem of how it is that "pastoral" ministry becomes narrowly defined. Critical theorists call this deconstructing consciousness, and to this concept I now turn.

CONSTRUCTED CONSCIOUSNESS AND HEGEMONY

Constructed consciousness means that one's awareness of reality and one's ability to interpret it have become distorted by the effects of power, making things seem as though they must inevitably be one way. Typically, that way is not one's own. In other words, deconstruction happens when it dawns on an individual or group of people that they have, over time, adopted ideas or practices that are actually working against their own interests and for the interests of somebody else instead. For example, when a pastor discovers

that he has (without realizing it) bought into the assumption that pastoral care is his price of admission for prophetic work and that it might be different, this discovery is the beginning of his consciousness being deconstructed.

The concept of “hegemony” is closely related. It means preponderant influence: hegemonic ideas are given an authority of their own so as to appear universally accepted, thwarting individuals’ ability to object. Ideas take on the status of incontrovertible truth. Constructed consciousness and hegemony are about power: they always benefit someone. The trick is to figure out who benefits—or, as my students would say, who wrote the rules, anyway. In particular, the idea of “being pastoral” has been constructed in such a way that “pastoral” and “prophetic” are too often set in tension with one another.⁸ This dichotomy leads to a distortion of the meanings of both pastoral care and prophetic work, and therefore I think it is a false construction. It has prevented many ministers from being active, effective leaders out of a perceived fear of not being “pastoral,” and it has also drained pastoral care of much of its strength by equating it with passive empathizing. When we are discussing a difficult ministry case in class, one of my students will inevitably say, “Well, the pastoral thing to do would be...” concluding with a proposal for action that does not offend, does not confront, and attends solely to the emotional content of the situation at the expense of any ethical or spiritual content. “Pastoral” at these times almost seems to mean little more than being a good comforter. In short, when set in opposition, both “pastoral” and “prophetic” are turned into clichés.

Ethicist Rebekah Miles argues that ethical guidance should be a crucial part of the pastoral role but that too many pastors resist the identity of moral guide. Pastors who fail to offer ethical wisdom and advice are like fishing guides who fail to tell you anything about bait:

If, on a fishing trip, I asked my guide, “What bait do I use here to catch bass?” I would expect the guide to offer advice. I would be frustrated if he replied, “Hmmm. So you’re wondering what bait to use,” or, “What sort of bait do you feel you might want to use?” or, even worse, “Let’s talk about your feelings about bait.” And in that moment, I would not benefit from a complex lecture on the history of bait. I just want to know if I should use a ‘Lucky 13’ or a night crawler. If, at a fork in the path, a knowledgeable trail guide asks the inexperienced group members to decide for themselves which way to go but refuses to tell them about the

options ahead or to offer her own judgment about the two choices, the group would be disgusted. A guide who refuses to advise and share knowledge is no guide at all. A guide is expected to lead and advise.⁹

Pastors are hesitant to offer moral guidance for many reasons, Miles suggests, including reluctance to set themselves up as a moral example, fear of the hard work involved, and a sense that they lack preparation. But Miles also implicates experts and scholars in the pastoral care field who in the past often constructed pastoral care as a morally neutral, nondirective enterprise aimed at promoting parishioner's happiness and self-fulfillment (without defining these).¹⁰ These experts exerted a powerful influence upon the pastoral theology curriculum taught to a generation of seminarians. It contributed in large part to the silence we hear from clergy around moral matters and helped create, I argue, the hegemonic assumptions we hear about pastoral work as nonpolitical work. In a similar vein, in *Images of Pastoral Care*, Robert Dykstra reminds us of the significant impact Anton Boisen had on the field of pastoral theology by framing the work of pastoral care as attending to "the living human document."¹¹ It has taken years to supplant his individualistic construction of personhood with other theories that take the social, economic, and political realities of human life into account.

I said that hegemonic thinking always works in someone's interest. In this case, constructing pastoral identity as non-guiding caregiver relieves pastors who are tempted to avoid taking more active and possibly confrontational pastoral roles. But it also serves the interests of those who do not want to be guided. Divorcing the prophetic from the pastoral benefits those who simply want the church to be a comfortable and comforting place, a safe haven from the world. It also benefits those who welcome fiery judgment, from the pulpit and bullhorn—so long as it is directed toward society's big problems (all the "isms") and not at them.

We all know parishioners who say they do not want "politics in church," including some who will use their financial resources to ensure that there will always be a church they can call their own. We also know students who do not want the curriculum politicized and who will avoid certain classes and professors. What these parishioners and students really mean is that they do not want the political arrangements of church and academy to disadvantage their interests. They like the politics of how things are. Ultimately, all those who have an interest in keeping the twopart keep the supposed tension between pastoral and prophetic ministry alive.

How does this discussion relate to possible strategies in field education? How might our pedagogical practices help students recognize the hidden, dominant definitions of pastoral identity? There are several things we could do. As with any confrontation with assumptions about identity, it is important to take the approach that fits the context. In some settings, students might be challenged by writing and critiquing their own personal histories and emerging identities. Or they could be invited to do actual pastoral work in front of each other, not just role-playing, and then deconstruct the meaning(s) of what happened. In any classroom, teachers might find it useful to draw attention to, rather than gloss over, the identity differences operating in the room and the assumptions about ministry each student brings into it. Finally, one of the most important strategies field educators can employ is to place students with supervising pastors who refuse to separate the pastoral from the prophetic. Hopefully all educators know practitioners in their communities engaged in prophetic ministry who also embody a clear pastoral identity. Being mentored by such a person is the best way to learn that the two need not ultimately conflict.

Finally, in addition to deconstructing our students' thinking, we also need to take a hard look at how our own teaching is constructed and what our pedagogical practices themselves communicate. In addition to "de-scribing" pastoral identity in ways just discussed, we must also make sure that our own practices do not themselves "in-scribe" meanings that we do not necessarily intend. Critical theorists call this adopting a constructivist epistemology.

POSITIVIST AND CONSTRUCTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

An epistemology is a theory of knowing, that is, an explanation of what it means to say that one has knowledge of something. Positivism is a way of knowing that relies upon empirical verification. Positivists believe we know something to be true if and when it can be factually proven. In their epistemology, knowledge is information. The scientific method I learned in seventh grade reflects positivism by requiring an objective, carefully monitored process in order to prove the truth of something. Knowledge is constituted by the findings resulting from such a process. According to this method, until you have proof of your hypothesis, you "only" have a theory. Constructivist epistemology, by contrast, values theory over information.

Theory is the constructive picture that lends interpretation to fact and experience and renders both of them meaningful. Hinchey: "For the constructivist, it is the *meaning assigned to the facts*, rather than the facts themselves, that matters when we talk about *knowledge*, about *knowing* something."¹² For many, assigning meaning to facts is liberating, for they can finally understand an experience they have had. Writer and educator bell hooks, for instance, says that feminist theory helped her make sense of the oppressively sexist home and school environments she grew up in: "I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me."¹³ She knew the facts of her childhood, and even as a child knew somehow to resist them, but it was not until someone introduced her to a theory of oppression that she had full knowledge of them and was thereby freed.

The difference between a positivist teacher and a constructivist one will manifest itself in how their students acquire knowledge. Positivists will insist on universal sets of assignments designed so that students will accumulate information and skills that can later be systematically tested. Everyone reads the same book and answers the same questions about it. Constructivists, on the other hand, will design assignments that make students into theorists, asking them to render information useful and valid, especially valid for their own experience. Knowledge is valued when it can be put to use—even differently by different students—not necessarily when it can be tested. Each child reads a different book and asks her own questions of it. Constructivist teachers not only invite students to unpack the meaning of whatever content they are learning but also to question why that content came to be produced in the first place. They will ask: Who benefits from the writing of this book? Or what is missing from its account?

The relevance for field education becomes clear when we look at our own assignments and their goals. Do we stipulate that students in internships should do a, b, and c in order to learn x, y, and z? I, for one, have no such list. Pressure to create one arises from time to time, from supervisors, students, and those administering assessment tools. By resisting the formulation of one, however, I believe I send several messages. One is that I value the knowledge students already bring to their internships, and I, thereby, encourage them in continued self-directed reflection on that knowledge, wherever that may take them. Beyond that, I am teaching the idea that field education not only about learning skills but also about figuring out what skills to learn. In fact, student internships may only be secondarily about

knowledge and skill accumulation and primarily about learning what it could mean to be a pastor.

Contextual pastoral educators of any kind already have a very effective learning tool in the pedagogical toolbox: the use of cases. Cases serve a constructivist epistemology very effectively because once inside the classroom they become stories that all can enter into imaginatively whatever the source. A case is literally the opposite of the verbatim, used in other educational settings. It does not recite the facts of an experience but renders them, thereby de-centering any one meaning of a particular experience that might prevail. Multiple meanings can and must be assigned to cases. Using them consistently and well forces students to think broadly and creatively about what it might mean to construct a pastoral identity and not just settle for the way things are.

One downside, of course, is that students invited to create their own contextual learning goals may initially only list boundary-setting and self-care! A constructivist teacher must, therefore, also encourage constructivist thinking about what it means to be pastoral. In contrast to a positivist teacher, who might identify ahead of time a list of experiences that fall under the heading “pastoral” skills, or even a liberal teacher who might ask students to list all their different experiences of a “pastoral” encounter, a constructivist teacher might additionally ask how they think they came to have those particular experiences. In other words, students would be invited to assign meaning to the facts of their past experience. Eventually this would lead to a richer and multifaceted set of goals for the future with assignments for meeting them.

Finally, by resisting any codification of what my students need to know right now in order to do ministry, I send a strong hint that there may be much more to learn beyond x, y, and z because ministry may need to be different in the future. If the profession of ministry needs to be transformed, we may not yet know what we need to know to transform it. Maybe the best thing we could do for our students is help them not to become “fit” for ministry today but to figure out what ministry will be tomorrow.

NOTES

1. I might add “culture producer,” following Jackson W. Carroll in *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 25–28. See also Robert C. Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2005). Dykstra argues for a multiplicity of images

for pastoral caregiving, even urging us to embrace identity instability when it comes to developing a pastoral theology.

1. Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Toward a Pedagogy for the Opposition*, revised and expanded ed. (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey, 2001), 9.

3. *Ibid.*, 8.

4. Patricia H. Hinchey, *Finding Freedom in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction to Critical Theory* (New York: P. Long, 1998), 13. Of course the ideology of a common education is seriously undermined by the reality of the way public schools are funded. Funding schools through local taxes ensures an unjust system of uneven education.

5. *Ibid.*, 12–13

6. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, *Thirteen Questions: Reframing Education's Conversation* (New York: P. Lang, 1995), 10.

7. Hinchey, *Finding Freedom in the Classroom*, 153.

8. One recent example may be found in John M. Buchanan's July 24, 2007 editorial in *The Christian Century* in which he describes advising a group of new clergy that, "congregations will give the preacher the right to be prophetic to the degree that they know him or her to be their pastor," p. 3. This is the "bargain" to which I refer.

9. Rebekah L. Miles, *The Pastor as Moral Guide* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999), 5.

10. Miles, *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 14, 41.

11. Robert C. Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care* (Atlanta, Ga.: Chalice Press, 2005).

12. Hinchey, *Finding Freedom in the Classroom*, 45. The italics are in the original.

13. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59