

High-Flex Field Education

Christina R. Zaker¹

He was literally emailing from a borderland. His daughter and wife were still in the US, but he had been deported due to a recent policy shift. He had been pursuing a master's degree in Hispanic Theology and Ministry at Catholic Theological Union and suddenly found himself in a border community wondering how to complete his field education. "Right there! Right now!" is what he and his director of field education decided, and so it went. Flexibility with shifting landscapes and supervisors who spoke different languages was part of the reality, yet he made it work. He completed his ministry practicum right there with the migrant community awaiting documentation and welcome from the community across the border.

When it comes to field education for theological students, this type of flexibility is not only important, it is almost an imperative. As Keith Donovan, site supervisor at the Brother David Darst Center in Chicago, responded when asked what had helped him stay flexible: "To some degree, there is no other option. Inflexibility is often where things begin to fall apart."¹ Daniel Corpening, the director of field education at Duke Divinity School, agrees:

Field education invites an inherent level of flexibility because we are playing a key role in the formation of an *individual* called by God . . . our rhythms are shaped by the stories of each student, each site we partner with, and God's Story at work in their lives and communities.

This imperative to operate with a certain level of flexibility is a skillset that theological field educators have which may be of importance for the shifting landscape of theological education.

This ability to adapt to the needs of students and communities was present even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the adaptive style was helpful during the pandemic too. As Steven Chambers of Vancouver School of Theology shared, In the pandemic period, one TFE [theological field education] student—actually located in Vancouver—worked on a project of Sunday School leadership and curriculum writing

¹ Christina Zaker is Director of Field Education and Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Email: czaker@ctu.edu

with a group of church educators in Indonesia. Her supervisor was located in Jakarta and so knew the context well. The work was carried out online across the time zones.

Creative responses to the signs of the times became the norm for all educators during the pandemic, but theological field educators have honed this skill set for years; the nature of their work assumes the need to be flexible. They count it as a critical piece of the educational experience to meet students where they are and to accompany them in their learning. The very thrust of field education—like Pope Francis’s image of the church as a field hospital—is to move out of our comfort zones and be immersed in a community of people as a companion on the journey. Each field educator determines how best to accompany their individual students, the communities they have forged relationships with such as teaching parishes or collaborative nonprofits, and the communities in which our institutions have their brick-and-mortar presence.

FIELD EDUCATION IN THE BORDERLANDS

This flexibility is what empowers field education to bridge the distance between spaces—between academy and community, classroom and ministry sites, teacher and mentor, student and professional, wise sage and beginner, and the juxtaposition of students placed in positions of power within communities of faith. These and myriad other ways are how field educators foster education at the crossroads, at borderlands that require flexibility. In fact, field educators recognize that it is in the very act of operating in such liminal spaces that critical integration and transformation happens.

The image of the transformation that can happen in borderlands is highlighted in the scripture of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 who comes from her own land to catch up with the itinerant preacher Jesus as he travels in the region. In his article “Transformation in the Borderlands: A Study of Matthew 15:21–28,” Daniel S. Schipani notes, “Contrary to what dominant cultures hold, the borderlands can become privileged places for the blessings of transformative learning, and for personal and communal growth and creativity.”ⁱⁱ

Field educators resonate with Jesus’ need to re-envision his ministry, to practice his cornerstone of hospitality even and perhaps most especially when he sits outside of the position of safety in his own land. Schipani continues, “The story of the Canaanite woman who confronts Jesus helps us realize that we can see reality better at places of marginality and vulnerability, and from the vantage point available to us at the borders. Our vision may thus be transformed. Hence, we are called to creative “willful contextual dislocations.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This dexterity with flexibility or “willful contextual dislocation” might be of value to our larger academic landscape as we continue to move from the pandemic into the new realities of theological education today.

A SURVEY OF THEOLOGICAL FIELD EDUCATORS

To try to name the ways field educators lead the way in fostering theological education that crosses borders and sustains transformative education, an ecumenical cross-section of North American field educators—a sampling of members of the Association of Theological Field Education—were asked a series of questions that focused on the value of flexibility in their work. Both field educators who teach in the academy and field educators who collaborate as site supervisors in the community were asked questions centered around ways they have learned to be flexible and ways that flexibility has cultivated rich educational soil.

In engaging respondents with the question of what words best situated the work of theological field education, we asked, “In addition to flexibility, what words describe your leadership or teaching style?” Repeated responses included *accessibility* (as in being accessible to students), *accommodating* and *adaptable* (adjusting to life circumstances of students or communities), and *agile* (to care for individual student’s needs). Chambers noted,

I want to make a case that ‘adaptable’ goes together with a word like ‘authentic’. I want to invite students to grow in their understanding that being adaptable is going to be the norm in pastoral and public ministry leadership, it will be part of their daily work. But I also want them to dig deeply into what authentically grounds them in their ministry, in personal self-understanding and in the community’s tradition and context.

Nimble was another word raised. Rev. Melvin Baber of Lancaster Seminary noted, “The pandemic has shown us that our field education program must be nimble, or we face the reality of becoming ineffective to our students and their educational journey.” One of the parish supervisors, Robert Kolatorowicz at Old St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Chicago, noted, “My own experience of ministry is nothing if not an experience of change, growth and learning to see ‘interruptions’ to my plans as occasions of Grace.” The reality that life in ministry necessitates a minister’s competence in navigating change and tolerance for flexibility is a learning outcome that occurs in field education. As Connie Rakitan, site supervisor at Faith and Fellowship in Oak Park, Illinois, put it, “Flexibility is a given. For us, the trick is to help field education students see it as normative.”

TEACHING AND LISTENING

I also asked field educators to describe their teaching style. Rakitan noted, “We operate out of a student-centered model of supervision rather than a content-centered model of teaching.” Dr. Barbara Blodgett, the associate dean of academic programs and assessment at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and past chair of the Association of Theological Field Education, put it clearly when she noted the shifts she had to make in her understanding of teaching.

I had to adjust my concept of teaching. Trained and formed as an academic, I had a narrow view of teaching as unpacking the ideas of others that were found in texts. Now I have a broad view of teaching as making meaning of human experience in community as found in texts and in lives.

Others noted that they saw themselves as a “facilitator of learning” or that “collaborative learning” was the style that described them as teachers. And listening came into focus again and again for field educators, specifically “listening to the Spirit.” Corpening noted, Listening is such a critical part of my leadership style in field education. Each day I try to carefully listen to our students—how God has been at work in their lives and where they feel God leading them. . . . I try to listen to our supervisor-mentors in what they need . . . so they feel empowered to aid in the formation of Christian leaders. . . . Finally, I try to listen to the voice of God to best discern how God would lead us to be faithful in our work. I can say with absolute confidence that listening is the most critical aspect of my work.

This three-part paying attention—to students, sites, and God—is meeting people where they are, in the borderlands of transformation. As Schipani noted in his article on the Canaanite woman meeting Jesus in the borderlands, this type of listening opens each participant to new directions, new perspectives, new models of being. “Both the woman and Jesus become boundary walkers and boundary breakers. By eventually choosing to relate and to minister ‘out of place,’ Jesus and the woman pointed the way to God’s utopia.”^{iv} This resonates with Blodgett’s description of adaptive leadership:

Adaptive as in Ron Heifetz’s leadership for adaptive change . . . so much is changing in theological education . . . practically all the building blocks I counted on when I began are now gone or recognizable only in different forms. . . . [T]here are basic principles to what we do in field education, but I am reckoning with adaptive change in all of them.

This reckoning with adaptive change or, as Baber noted, this need to be “nimble or face the reality of becoming ineffective” are issues field educators attend to regularly. As the academy and the ministry landscapes shift, field educators lead the way for our theological schools and seminaries to reimagine the basic principles we hold as theological educators. How to adapt to meet those seeking to learn how to accompany the people of God, and how to have a finger on the pulse of the needs of the communities our students are destined to accompany, are questions that push field educators to “willful dislocation.” Each of these questions are engaged again and again as we work with our students, with our site supervisors, and with our colleagues within field education.

EXPLORING ENGAGED PEDAGOGY

So, what might be the skills field educators can share with their students and institutions on the critical nature of flexibility in adaptive leadership in theological education?

Another helpful conversation partner might be bell hooks and her development of engaged pedagogy. In her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks highlights what she sees as the liberatory process of learning to teach, which she calls engaged pedagogy. And although her areas of expertise are not specifically theological, her convictions about teaching challenge all theological educators to engage. She begins, "To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn." And then she goes on to challenge, "That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students."^v She continues throughout her text to highlight critical aspects of engaged pedagogy. A few of these are important to the conversation here because they are pieces field educators value as well.

Both engaged pedagogy and theological field education insist that personal narrative is an essential part of the learning process. Students understand theological truths as they play out in the lived experiences of their ministry. Their own stories and the stories of those they accompany in the community take center stage as an authoritative text worth exploring. Students learn in field education and the accompanying theological reflection not only to value story as text but to listen to one another's stories with an eye on mutual respect and shared wisdom. hooks notes, "More radical subject matter does not create liberatory pedagogy, [so] that a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the curriculum . . . sharing personal narratives and linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know."^{vi}

She goes on to point out how students, especially those from marginalized communities, see the normal educational system as not valuing their voice. "Students . . . mostly from working-class backgrounds, come to college assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of ideas."^{vii} Engaged pedagogy, like field education, values students' voices and centers their experiences as sources worth interrogating in the pursuit of transformative reflective practice.

This type of centering of personal narrative requires a skillset in facilitation that is not often taught in preparation for teaching in higher education. hooks notes that one reason educators resist centering personal narratives is that this type of discussion is unpredictable and takes skill to cultivate. As she notes, "Many professors who are critical of the inclusion of confessional narrative in the classroom or of digressive discussions, where students are doing a lot of the talking, are critical because they lack the skill needed to facilitate dialogue. . . . Once the space for dialogue is open in the classroom, that moment must be orchestrated so that you don't get bogged down with people who just like to hear themselves talk, or with people who are unable to relate experience to the academic subject matter."^{viii}

One of the most critical tools field educators use in the classroom is that of engaging students in ongoing dialogue through the tool of theological reflection. This shared dialogue that demands integration with theological concepts and contextual frames offers the space for reflection and transformation. Field educators know the privileged and sacred space such dialogue creates and can offer insights from the tools of reflective practice to foster not only artful facilitation of dialogue but also a commitment to listening. A task of all educators is to foster the type of dialogue that not only gets teachers listening to and valuing students' voices but helps the students to learn to listen to one another. As hooks notes, "One of the responsibilities of the teacher is to help create an environment where students learn that, in addition to speaking, it is important to listen respectfully to others."^{ix}

The sacred space that is created when experience takes center stage in a classroom is something that profoundly shifts the way students learn. It also shifts the way teachers teach. We see ourselves as learning as well. Carolyn Wright, assistant professor of pastoral theology and field educator at Aquinas Institute, avers, I have never understood myself in the traditional sense of the sage on the stage. I am as much a learner as my students. Yes, I carry a bit more in my repertoire and because of that, I have the privilege to facilitate their learning and formation.

The humility of recognizing teaching as a privilege resonates with what Corpening noted earlier. When he mentions the way he listens to each student, to each community and the story of God lived out in them, he is highlighting a certain humility that comes with stepping to the side in order to allow the wisdom of the group to surface. hooks notes, When I enter the classroom at the beginning of the semester the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners *together*. It positions me as a learner . . . we are all equally committed to creating a learning context.^x

As Leelamma Sabastian, director of pastoral formation at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, points out: "Our primary responsibility is to take care of the people in our care. This starts with listening which leads to learning with and from each other." As Schipani notes in his article on Matthew 15, "As Jesus himself experienced, ministry at its best is a two-way street, a mutual practice and process."^{xi}

CONCLUSION

Field educators are skilled practitioners in flexibility and adaptive leadership. They navigate borderlands as transformative spaces that bring the best out of their students and their teaching. Centering personal narratives, facilitating reflective dialogue, and listening to learn alongside our students takes humility and skill and trust in the movements of the Spirit. This type of skill set will be useful to position theological education in the future.

As bell hooks challenges colleagues and institutions to value engaged pedagogy, so too do theological field educators hope to encourage a flexibility and adaptive style that can lead theological schools into a new way of accompanying our students and the communities that partner with us in caring for the people of God.

¹ Keith Donovan was one of several dozen people surveyed during July and August 2022 for this article. Those included in the survey represented a cross-section of theological field educators who are members of the Association of Theological Field Education (<https://atfe.org>) as well as site supervisors who accompany students in various ministry placements. All quotes that follow from site supervisors and field educators are from their written responses to this survey. All participants knew their responses would help in building this article. I would like to thank each of them for their thoughtful responses.

² Daniel S. Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands: A Study of Matthew 15:21–28," *Vision 2*, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 21.

³ Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands," 21.

⁴ Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands," 19.

⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

⁶ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 148.

⁷ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 148.

⁸ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 151.

⁹ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 150.

¹⁰ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 153.

¹¹ Schipani, "Transformation in the Borderlands," 22.