

## Emily Click, Harvard Divinity School



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Field education prepares ministerial leaders by blending actual ministerial experiences with more traditional learning about theoretical concepts. This suggests field educators will have resources and insights about how to develop integrative educational strategies throughout theological education. Many theological schools' curricula are still based on an older model for education that separates the development of ministry skills from the learning of theory. This model sees field education as the administrative work of placing students in situations to develop practical ministry skills. However, new developments in education point to the ways that professionals need to learn a particular type of reasoning in the field. This calls for pedagogical strategies for connecting the development of skills for practice with reasoning about theory.

In a recent New York Times article about changes in law school curricula, for example, William Sullivan, a senior scholar with the Carnegie Foundation, is quoted as saying, “There is a mode of practical reasoning, of reasoning in situations, that requires that knowledge be constructed and reconstructed to deal with the situation at hand.” He adds, “And that’s the kind of reasoning that good practitioners develop, and it’s something that we know can be taught, but we know it’s not taught very much” (New York Times, October 31, 2007). Field education leads theological education in developing strategies to do just that: teach the habits of reasoning in situations that prepare ministerial leaders.

In other words, field education is an ideal location for praxis, the dynamic combination of theory and practice brought into educational consciousness by the writings of Paulo Friere. The praxis model sets up multiple occasions in which a student can be mentored for critical thinking. Mentoring in the field is usually regarded as just one piece of teaching reflective practice. Students also need coaching in a classroom setting by a teacher skilled in engaging ministerial practices with critical theories. Field educators therefore not only place students as administrators; they train mentors to lead reflection in the field, and they teach critical thinking about experience in the classroom setting.

Theological field educators have led an overall trend within theological education toward more extensive integrations of theory and practice. There has been widespread recognition of the inadequacy of the old pedagogical model which called for building mastery of theoretical concepts prior to and separate from engaging those concepts with real life ministry situations and problems. My recent survey of theological field education in North America showed that field educators lead such changes by employing a range of strategies designed to bridge the stubborn gaps between theories of Christian ethics, theology, and history, and the practical realities of ministerial leadership.

In brief, these changes come in three primary forms. First, there is the shift toward engaging field education experiences throughout the curriculum, in order to integrate the whole curriculum, and also as a way to bring practice into more immediate contact with the dynamics of constructing theory. Second, there is a shift away from the old model, of learning theory for several years before engaging students within ministry settings, toward earlier and more extensive practice that is concurrent with the study of theoretical concepts. Finally, there is a movement toward engaging students in situations that are unlike their familiar settings, so that they can recognize their cultural biases and assumptions in a way that better prepares them for ministry in emerging realities.

The first shift is toward more robust integration throughout the theological school curriculum. In the traditional model, students study highly theoretical expositions of scriptural, historical, theological, and ethical ideas before they try to preach, teach, or counsel parishioners. The old model respected expertise within each realm, so that theological educators did not claim to know how to apply theory, nor did actual practitioners usually build theory. There were notable exceptions to this rule in individual cases, but in general the two realms of theory and practice were held separate so as to uphold the distinctive value of each. Furthermore, each discipline within theological education was taught distinctly from other disciplines, so that theological studies were rarely combined with historical studies or ethics. This atomized model of teaching various aspects of the traditional theological curriculum is widely recognized as outmoded.

However, there is no singular, obvious route to integrate studies that have traditionally been kept separate. Field education is often named as the crucial tool for accomplishing a wider goal of integrating the curriculum.

At Harvard Divinity School, we also are developing new ways to engage traditional disciplines in the classroom setting. For example, this year I am co-teaching a required introductory course on the histories, theologies and practices of Christianity with a classical theologian, Francis Shüssler Fiorenza. The simple act of pairing an ordained congregational pastor whose lecturer status is based in ministry studies with a classical, world-renowned theologian is a bold statement in itself. We have also, however, taken care to construct the course in such a way as to embody the impulse of praxis. We alternate lectures by one of us on key theological doctrines with class discussions of cases. Recently, for example, we had a class lecture on the doctrines of sin. The next class session, we examined the case of a woman locked in a lifetime marriage characterized by physical abuse. The ministry incident we discussed was the occasion of the pastor's visit to the widow on the death of the abusing husband, and his subsequent musing over what to say at the memorial about the until-then invisible abuse. This enabled us to explore the ways various doctrines of sin helped illuminate the tragic dimensions of the woman's situation. Students also explored the ways they might actually talk with the woman about her situation.

We are learning that teaching with a praxis model is messy. Students find their own life stories are stirred by disturbing cases. In a class of sixty students from multiple faith traditions, no one perspective is necessarily upheld as the right doctrine or even one approach as correct. But we are convinced that such pedagogy is more likely to produce reflective practitioners, and will also be more likely to lead to the construction of better theologies.

Another evolving strategy is to engage students in ministerial practice earlier in their studies. At Harvard Divinity School, students are encouraged to enter into field education during their first semester. This is our concrete way of declaring that learning in the ministry situation is an integrated piece of the overall program — the impulse of connecting real-life ministry experiences with classroom learning begins at the initiation of the MDiv and potentially continues throughout the full three-year program. Students at Harvard Divinity School are enrolled concurrently in a reflection course that teaches how to engage in critical reflection on actual experience. Additionally at Harvard Divinity School, we regularly offer case study reflection conferences for the entire faculty, field education supervisors, and the student body. These conferences are opportunities to study actual cases that are written and presented by a student, then commented upon by a supervisor, and then by a faculty person. This enhances the visibility to the whole community of what students engaged in ministry settings are actually facing. It also models the ways that theoretical disciplines can shed light upon actual ministry situations.

Finally, at Harvard Divinity School we offer increasing opportunities for students to enter into settings that are vastly different from those with which they are familiar. Last summer, for example, we sent students to Rwanda, Kashmir, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. They engaged in ministry in those diverse locations. However, we saw the learning value enhanced by the ways we also took care to build in multiple opportunities for them to reflect on their experiences. For example, I went and visited three of the students in Guatemala, and engaged in critically reflective conversations in the field. Next summer I plan to visit at least two different settings with two other faculty persons. We recognize that we, as faculty persons, will teach crucial reflective skills to students by engaging in such visits. However, we also will find our own teaching styles and assumptions challenged by these visits. The goal of these international placements is not just for students to do ministry, but also for them to learn better ways to engage in caring relationships that are not as bounded by cultural assumptions and experiences. We hope that students will be changed and challenged by such opportunities, and also that Harvard Divinity School will grow responsively due to these wider engagements in the world.

In conclusion, exciting things are happening within theological education generally, and also within theological field education. We are learning how to build more effectively integrated learning experiences. We are developing new ways to construct theory that take actual ministry situations into account. And we are educating leaders who will be reflective practitioners in emerging ministerial realities.