

Report on the First-Year Contextual Education Pilot Program at EDS 2016-17
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During the 2016-17 academic year, while serving as Director of Contextual Education at Episcopal Divinity School, I had the opportunity to pilot a new model of contextual education for first-year seminarians. This document is a report on the rationale, design, and experience of this program. Since EDS is no longer granting degrees in Cambridge, MA location, my service with EDS has ended, and we did not have the opportunity to take what we learned during this pilot year and refine our model. The response of the students involved and those who trained or supervised them was positive enough that I believe our story is worth telling, so that it can help fertilize future work elsewhere.

Rationale:

In the “Clergy Into Action Study” of effective clergy leadership, Dr. David Gortner reports that “the dominant model of pastoral/priestly leadership over-emphasizes the pastoral, homiletic, and sacramental facets of ministry and de-emphasizes (and even seeks to avoid) the facets of ministry having to do with organizational leadership and community-building.” Newly ordained clergy report low levels of self-confidence for the work of community outreach and connection, as well as organizational leadership.¹

In my own experience of sixteen years of supervising seminarians and young adult interns in the Boston area, I have found that they rarely had experience in these areas and often had a vision of ordained ministry that did not accord with its contemporary practice. It is often challenging to get them to set learning goals in areas outside of preaching, pastoral care, and liturgical leadership. Students often have a lot to say about justice but little experience gathering people to *do* justice. In addition, while seminarians work with wonderful faculty and grow in knowledge and wisdom on campus, they often go three years unaware of extraordinary resources for learning community organizing, justice-making, and the power of collaboration located just blocks from their seminary.

My own seminary education was rich in many ways, but gave me virtually no tools for two callings that have been essential to my ministry over nineteen years of ordained leadership: leading change and building relationships with the community. I have had to develop these skills post-seminary. Having recently had the opportunity to participate in the ordination process in my current diocese while serving as a member of the Standing Committee, it became clear to me that what Scott Cormode calls the “ecology of vocation” in the church has not changed much in the last twenty years.² That is, the factors shaping an aspirant’s understanding of what their ministerial life will look like lead them to assume they will be mainly serving the pastoral needs of those already assembled in the church building.

¹ Clergy Into Action: From Seminary into Ministry. See <http://into-action.net/>

² Scott Cormode (principal investigator), Emily Click, Terri Elton, Susan Maros, and Lisa Withrow, “The Ecology of Formation,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 2, Fall 2012.

One of the four central factors contributing to an “ecology of vocation” is a person’s experience in seminary, both on campus and off. How might the contextual education program at a seminary be enhanced so as to expand this ecology to include community outreach and connection? What might be added in to affect the seminarian’s vision of “church leadership” or “leading for God’s mission” in a way that allows them to more effectively lead change and do justice?

Design:

Our goal at EDS was not to detract from the existing contextual education program, which was similar to that at many seminaries: students were required to do two units of contextual education (350 hrs/unit), one unit of which could be CPE. Most students chose to do their first unit of CE in a local congregation or college chaplaincy, where their ministry general focused on preaching, pastoral care, and liturgical leadership. Here students gained important skills, worked with excellent supervisors, and practiced theological reflection on their experience. All of this was great. The goal of our new requirement was not to detract from this traditional requirement, but to add experience and training early in the seminarian’s career that would make them even more valuable to the congregations they served during their second and third years, and expand their “ecology of vocation” in a way that would make them more faithful and useful to God’s mission in our time.

The new requirement had three major components:

1. All first-year master’s degree students spent eight hours/week during their first term immersed in a non-profit organization, doing non-worship-focused ministry. Students were assigned to this site in consultation with the director of contextual education. They also met for a two-hour/month seminars on campus, facilitated by the director of contextual education (me) and attended by the student’s faculty advisor. This seminar focused on reading one’s context, theological reflection, and appreciative inquiry.
1. In the second term of their first year, the student received community organizing training and then worked together to create and lead a justice-related campaign. Monthly seminars for reflection on their experience continued.
1. In addition, the students attended three panel discussions featuring local pastors and faculty on particular issues in ministry. These panel events were co-created with EDS Lifelong Learning, open to the public, including site supervisors, and were recorded and made available online.

Our Experience:

Internships: The students were placed in a variety of sites in Cambridge, Boston, and Waltham, with supervisors recruited and trained by me. Supervisors were not asked to reflect theologically

with the student, but simply to help orient them to their work, help them learn read their environment, certify that they had done their work and added value to the organization, and report back on particular strengths and learning edges for their student. Because the placements were quite short term, students were not creating new programs or leading new ventures but helping out with existing programs of the organization.

Supervisors found the interns valuable and fulfilled their responsibilities well. A few students continued to volunteer with these groups after the internship ended. Several others articulated ways in which their experience had made them aware of gaps in their relational skills and/or given them a deep appreciation for those who are marginalized and a deeper desire to work for systemic changes that would end such marginalization. In our seminar conversations debriefing their experiences, students helped one another find connections between their academic studies and their experience as interns. Most, but not all, were able to put in eight hours a week, as planned, and the supervisors reported that their student added value on site.

Community organizing: As their internships were ending, the students began community organizing training, offered in partnership with Leadership Development Initiative, based in Boston. LDI staff worked with us to adjust aspects of the program to fit the schedules and learning goals of seminarians when they varied from those of parish groups that make up the majority of the clientele. They attended two all-day trainings with parish teams, and had several other training meetings on campus with LDI staff. Students worked with an coach from the LDI staff to define their shared purpose, organize their team, and create a campaign to educate and encourage composting within their dining community, composed of students from EDS and Lesley University.

Working intensely on a project with others is hard work, of course (!), and our small-but-very-diverse group of students struggled to communicate well and make decisions. Because of the condensed timeline for the campaign, the students weren't able to recruit a larger team and share the work to the extent that the community organizing model asks. Nonetheless, they tried on the tools, tried out the ministry of leading change, and finished knowing that it is uncomfortable by design. They were able to articulate what they learned about themselves from the experience- their strengths and growing edges. And they carried out a successful project, which was well-received by the community.

During the trainings, the students saw parish groups working on justice-based campaigns. They had the chance to talk with members of those teams about their motivations and strategies. They heard that this was hard but holy work. The witness of these parish-based groups was important to our students, as few of them had ever seen a parish group engaged in community organizing.

Panel discussion: All the first-year students attended the three panel discussions on key ministry topics. The topics were:

1. The theology and practice of failure
2. Mental Health issues in the parish
3. Taking anti-oppression work to the parish

Each panel included faith leaders from the Boston area who were able to speak from broad experience and make themselves available to students for future conversation. They were asked to share stories and to use “what I wish I’d learned in seminary” as a guide for deciding what to share. I served as the moderator for the discussions. These events were well-attended by EDS staff and faculty, as well as local faith leaders and alums. Students sat at tables with others, where time for response and conversation at table was built into the program.

Students reported that these panel discussions were extremely valuable to them. They left each one with new questions and a slight reframing of their sense of what ministerial leadership looks like. They heard from all of the panelists in different ways how important it is to seek support, collaborate with other churches, and learn from the resources in one’s community.

What we would have done “next year”:

Overall, our pilot program was a good start to accomplishing the goals we set for it. However, we launched into it unaware that we would not have a “next year” in which to make it even more effective. I am sad not to have the chance to make revisions to the program based on what we learned this year, nor to be able to track the impact of the program on the curricular and vocational choices and capacities of the students who participated. Nonetheless, I offer here some thoughts on what we would have done “next year” in the hopes that they will be helpful to those of you involved in seminary education and/or other leadership formation processes in the church.

1. Rather than have each student at a different internship site, I would have students “clumped” at a few sites, both to simplify the logistics of overseeing this program and communicating with the supervisors, and so that the students could better support one another in the on-site work and reflection on it.
2. Rather than run the internships as 8 hr/wk for one term, I would run them as 5 hr/wk for two terms. This would allow the students more time to get to know the “system” within which they are working, build relationships, and see the ministry through various ups and downs.
3. I would introduce the concept of community organizing earlier in the academic year and spend more time with the students framing it historically, theologically, and vocationally. A few of our students had done organizing work, but the majority had no background in it and needed more help than I had anticipated understanding what we were doing and why.

4. I would require the students to write a weekly written reflection on their experience. This would deepen their learning and give me greater insight into how I could better resource them as the year continued.

I am extremely thankful to the faculty of Episcopal Divinity School, who enthusiastically supported this project and worked creatively to make room for it in the curriculum. EDS was an ideal place to for this pilot program, given the school's long-standing commitment to justice and anti-oppression work as central to Christian vocation. But just as importantly, the faculty understood the need to bridge a gap between intellectual understanding of theological ethics and embodied, skilled practice of them.

I am also thankful for great collaboration from Natalie Finstad and the staff of LDI , who worked outside the box of their flagship program to support this work. And I benefitted greatly from the encouragement and wisdom of the Rev. Kammy Young, Director of Field Education at Sewanee School of Theology, who graciously shared her experience bringing community organizing into the curriculum there. Her work gave me the courage to even bring up my vision at EDS!

Regardless of where they go post-seminary, faith leaders will be involved in leading change. We live in an era when creative thinking, bold collaboration, and community partnerships are woven into the work of the church's mission. Our pilot program at EDS was just one of many efforts happening around the church to sort out how to expand the "ecology of vocation" of seminarians so that they are prepared to be even more useful and faithful in our times. I look forward to being part of the on-going conversation about how best to equip the next generation of ordained and lay leaders for this ministry.