

Article

# Theological Field Education as a Bridge across Disciplines

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**Abstract:** Theological field education—also known as contextual education—operates as the explicitly embodied nexus of seminary-based learning, placing both practical theological and broader theological, religious, and/or spiritual educational frameworks in dialogue with one’s experiences within a particular site context. Drawing upon the example of the events that took place in March 1965 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge connecting Selma to Montgomery, as well as the bridge’s enduring function as a material and symbolic site of transformation, connections are made to the ways that theological field education bridges both practical theology and other areas of theological education, generally and as actualized specifically within one theological school’s field education program, through three overarching themes: Embodiment, reflection, and formation. In the acts of bridging that occur in each of these areas, points of commonality are discussed and illustrated. Finally, initial suggestions for further bridging between disparate academic fields and theological field education are offered toward the cultivation of a more integrative, transformative curriculum.

**Keywords:** theological field education; contextual education; practical theology; formation; theological reflection; embodiment



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## 1. Introduction

March 24, 2020 marked 55 years since roughly 25,000 protestors successfully crossed Alabama’s Edmund Pettus Bridge connecting Selma to Montgomery after two previous attempts ending in police attacks and bloodshed. Congressman John Lewis, one of the march’s leaders who nearly died on the bridge in 1965, worked tirelessly in subsequent years leading up to his death in July 2020 to maintain the memory within America’s collective conscience of the events that occurred. On this 55th anniversary of what became known as Bloody Sunday, Lewis articulated, “To see hundreds and thousands of young people with their mothers, their fathers, their grandparents, great grandparents, to see black and white people, Hispanics, and others standing together, marching together, walking together, [we must] not forget what happened and how it happened” (Cole 2020, para. 8).

The Edmund Pettus Bridge offers a poignant example of a material and symbolic site of transformation regarding voting rights in America, as well as a carrier and connector of disparate entities and ideas across time and space. Within theological education, the bridge serves as an apt (if not overused) metaphor for the ways that a seminary curriculum attempts to connect concepts and practices across disciplines for the sake of student transformation. Theological field education—or contextual education—operates as the explicitly embodied nexus of seminary-based learning, placing both practical theological and broader theological, religious, and/or spiritual educational frameworks in dialogue with one’s experiences within a particular site context. The general aim of contextual education is for learners to garner practical wisdom (*phronesis*), “a distinctive kind of integrative knowing, taking account of multiple sources of information and combining them in ways that render insights into action, information into judgment” (Cahalan 2017, p. 205).

As such, this article touches upon some of the ways that theological field education bridges both practical theology and other areas of theological education, generally and as actualized specifically within one theological school’s field education program, through

three overarching themes: Embodiment, reflection, and formation. In the acts of bridging that occur in each of these areas, points of commonality are discussed and illustrated, each making reference to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In this manner, both the events that took place in this material space and the resulting symbolic meanings give nuanced shape to the bridging metaphor. Finally, initial suggestions for further bridging between disparate academic fields and theological field education are offered toward the cultivation of a more integrative, shared formational curriculum.

## 2. Naming Our Starting Points and Bridges

The act of naming areas that are in need of bridging, as well as naming the bridges themselves, is a collaborative and contested practice, as evidenced in the case of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which is named after a Confederate brigadier general, U.S. Senator, and Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. Upon Lewis' death in July 2020, online petitions garnered thousands of signatures calling for the renaming of the Pettus Bridge to the John Lewis Bridge. In a 2015 editorial Lewis co-authored with Alabama Representative Terri A. Sewell, they articulated: "Symbols are indeed powerful. Keeping the name of the Bridge is not an endorsement of the man who bears its name but rather an acknowledgment that the name of the Bridge today is synonymous with the Voting Rights Movement which changed the face of this nation and the world" (Sewell and Lewis 2015, para. 8). In this manner, naming is a symbolic act.

Within theological education, a discipline that has been named one way by some may not be acceptable for others. As a result, the existence of the discipline itself may have a greater likelihood of being questioned within the larger theological canon. Such is the case for field education, which also goes by the names of contextual education, experiential education, integrative education, supervised ministry, and professional formation, among others. Its prominence within the greater theological education curriculum has waxed and waned over time, depending on its situatedness within individual seminaries. In general, however, theological field education is not respected uniformly or unanimously as a discipline in its own right, as articulated by those teaching and directing within the field (Scharen and Miller 2018). Somewhat similarly, practical theologians have long debated the nomenclature, boundaries, and situatedness of their discipline within the larger academy (Cameron et al. 2010; Graham et al. 2005; Miller-McLemore 2012). However, due precisely to these contestations and variances, both theological field education and practical theology contain greater bridging capacities than perhaps more differentiated or historically contained disciplines.

The focus of this article is not to recount the historical and contextual movements that have created complexities within the modern theological education curriculum. Regardless, context and timelines are important in the process of naming, particularly as we engage the work of constructing and naming bridges across different areas of said curriculum. A hopeful aim for theological education as a whole should be integration across disciplines as a central learning outcome for students (and not as a dismantling of the disciplines themselves) (Cahalan et al. 2017). For this type of integration to occur in meaningful ways for learners, bridging the chasms between disciplines becomes necessary work for the purposes of student transformation.

Before discussing particular themes or constructs that form bridges across disciplines and make integration possible, it is important to offer brief grounding definitions for these areas that are most relevant to the current conversation: Practical theology, field education, and theological education. Practical theology itself is a multi-definitional term and, therefore, offers varying bridging points for connecting across disciplines and with contextual education specifically. According to Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, practical theology is "a *discipline* among scholars...an *activity of faith* among believers...a *method* for studying theology in practice...and a *curricular area* of subdisciplines in the seminary" (Miller-McLemore 2012, para. 14). In this article, I refer to practical theology generally as a discipline among scholars except when noted otherwise.

Contextual education within the seminary curriculum “provides places to practice ministry and spaces to reflect theologically on that experience to the end that the student experiences growth toward ministerial competency that has theological integrity” (Blodgett and Floding 2015, p. 1). More broadly defined, field education’s goal is the cultivation of *phronesis* that combines lived experience with one’s religious or value tradition(s) to inform being, knowing, and doing in the world. Field education is, in essence, a *practical* kind of education that includes the use of reflective frameworks originating from the discipline of practical theology. Moreover, contextual education itself bridges the gap between academy and community by rooting the action-reflection-action (or reflection-action-reflection) heart of practical theology in lived experience.

Theological education can be defined generally as an intentional curriculum of courses, fieldwork, and formational programs designed to engage “the transmission of Christian memory, the education for God’s peace and justice, and the formation of church and community leadership” and also includes the frameworks that extend beyond its Christian-centric nomenclature to include broader religious and spiritual education as curricular entities within institutions of higher learning (Werner et al. 2010, p. xxv). More than defining what theological education is, recent scholarship has focused on the purpose and function of this type of education, with increased dialogue surrounding its changing nature in light of larger societal and religious shifts (Aleshire 2020, 2011; Matthaei and Howell 2014; Valentín 2019; Wheeler 2019).

These respective conceptions—contextual education, practical theology, and theological education—can operate as both bridges and/or the areas in need of bridging, depending on various factors. What is salient to this article, however, centers on the notion of theological field education as possessing specific bridging capacities that aid in integration across the theological curriculum. This makes field education not only unique among the disciplines in this regard but also intentionally designed by its nature to be a key element in the work of integration through three central themes: Embodiment, reflection, and formation.

### 3. Bridges of Embodiment

On Bloody Sunday, around 600 activists attempted to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Their presence enraged white leaders and incited beatings, resulting in 17 hospitalizations and many other injuries (CNN Editorial Research 2020, para. 2, 7). Ultimately, all experience—violent, nonviolent, or otherwise—begins in the body, and these bodies themselves constitute material and symbolic sites of transformation, much like bridges (Anzaldúa 1983). In the context of theological education, individuals function first as bodies who teach and learn (and not as teachers and learners who happen to have bodies), though the Enlightenment has both minimized and othered the body’s role in western academia. In reinstating the primacy of the body related to student formation, it becomes paramount to speak of all pedagogical and formational being-thinking-doing taking place within and through embodiment.

Trudy Hawkins Stringer asserts, “Theological field education creates new spaces for learning in ways that compel us beyond our cognitive faculty and into a more holistic engagement of multisensory, embodied ways of learning and teaching” (Stringer 2020, p. 107). As an inherently experiential pedagogy, this contextualized form of education centralizes the body as a source of knowing through embodied realizing, that is, “developing skilled competence in bodily action” (Cahalan 2017, p. 206). In the early stages of a field education experience, students begin to practice particular skills repeatedly (e.g., leading worship, preaching, providing pastoral care, coordinating programs with volunteers, maintaining healthy relationships, etc.), which is critical “because the actions become inscribed in the body as muscle memory” toward a fuller embodiment of the “identity, role, and responsibility of their profession” (Cahalan 2017, pp. 208, 214).

Embodiment functions as a bridge across disciplines through numerous avenues. Connections with practical theology, primarily as an *activity of faith* among believers from

Miller-McLemore's earlier definition, underscores the primacy of embodied practice within localized contexts. Across the theological disciplines, bodies have been and continue to be the focus within liberation, feminist, womanist, mujerista, queer, disabilities, indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies, among others. For example, Isasi-Díaz's (2002) description of *lo cotidiano* ("the everyday") as a foundational element of mujerista theology centers the day-to-day lived experiences of Latinas as the starting point for the construction of theologies of liberation. Heike Peckruhn's constructive theological work grounded in personal and familial sensory experiences argues that "bodily experience demands attention not as one realm, but as *the* realm from which to understand how our existence in the world makes sense" (Peckruhn 2017, p. 12).

In the experience of directing a theological field education program at a primarily white, protestant theological school in the western U.S., I cannot engage in this work apart from my light-skinned, dark-haired, cisgender female, short, rotund body. As a biracial Puerto Rican-Italian woman who also happens to be a younger junior faculty member from a low socioeconomic background, dynamics of embodiment come into play in relationship to power dynamics of gender, race, class, rank, skin tone, body type, and age, among other factors. Joyce del Rosario articulates this poignantly: "For people of color, particularly women of color, we cannot escape our objectified bodies, so we see the world through all of who we are" (del Rosario 2020, p. 92). This is true especially in academic spaces that were not designed for bodies like mine, which is all the more reason I am learning to lead from an embodied epistemology, "a source of knowing and teaching from our intersectional selves" (del Rosario, p. 92). An embrace of this epistemology does not presume that microaggressions and macroaggressions by others (peers, students, etc.) on my embodiment will be any less violent, however, I seek to minimize the violence I inflict on myself by more fully being and acting from my intersectionalities, rather than attempting to perform the "white, self-sufficient man" that is the standard within academia (Jennings 2020). This is doubly the hope for students in contextual education, whether they be white, brown, or black bodies traumatized by the ravages of colonialism and racism (Menakem 2017), queer bodies (Talvacchia 2015), classed/caste bodies (Wilkerson 2020), disabled or differently-abled bodies (Creamer 2009), and beyond.

By imagining embodiment as a bridging theme linking contextual education with practical theology and other theological disciplines, possibilities are created for traversing chasms toward integrative student formation. With this widened conceptualization, it must be acknowledged that the body still garners a great deal of suspicion and minimization within the academy. In this context, the crossing of disciplinary and thematic bridges might be experienced as acts of subversion, resistance, or transformation themselves (in likened fashion to the perceptions of actions taken by the gathered masses on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965). Ultimately, these disciplinary crossings only strengthen the curriculum toward a fuller embodiment of both theory and practice.

#### 4. Bridges of Reflection

The crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 constituted a moment of action in American history around equal voting rights for African Americans. Those actions illustrate an engaged praxis, a joining of reflection, and embodied movement for the sake of social transformation. In theological education, reflection on action in ministry serves as the formational crux of theological field education, as well as practical theology. In this way, the bridge of action-reflection-action (or reflection-action-reflection) traverses across various disciplines within the theological curriculum to connect theory and practice.

Reflection and action exist in dialogical interplay, consequently, *how* one reflects on practice has been a central focus for scholars over the last several decades. Don Browning's (1983) articulation of a reasoned practice provides a foundation upon which practical theologians and theological field educators alike continue rest when inviting students into theological reflection. Even with later expansions and critiques of this hermeneutic, by both Browning and others, the basic framework of theological reflection has remained the

same over time and includes: (1) Description of an event, experience, or problem in one's field context, (2) personal reflection on that experience or issue (emotions arising, relational dynamics present, etc.), (3) theological reflection of the experience or issue (drawing upon one's own form of Christian tradition, related disciplines, etc.), and (4) informed actions arising from the first three steps (Killen and Beer 1994; Osmer 2008; Whitehead and Whitehead 1981). This cornerstone of theological field education is situated within the discipline of practical theology, yet the embodiment of practical theology as a discipline is only truly actualized within the seminary curriculum through a student's contextual education experience. Emily Click articulates, "Many schools point to contextual learning as the integrative heart of the entire curriculum. It provides material crucial to the learning in other courses and pulls together diverse strands of knowledge by linking reflection on action to theoretical principles" (Click 2012, para. 8).

While reflection upon action as related to personal and professional formation in ministry practice has been connected thusly within theological education, the field has often ignored the connections that this bridge maintains with other areas of the curriculum. As with the bridge of embodiment, liberation, feminist, womanist, mujerista, queer, disabilities, indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies have long been attentive to the interconnections between reflection and action, as well as between theory and practice. Years before Browning and Whitehead and Whitehead, Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* called for greater attention to critical reflection on praxis related to local, historical contexts both within and beyond the church. He argued, "Above all, we intend [critical reflection] to express the theory of a definite practice. The Christian community professes a 'faith which works through charity.' It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others" (Gutiérrez 1973, p. 9). More recently, decolonial scholars Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh questioned the broader dichotomy itself of theory and praxis, instead calling for the idea of "theory-and-as-praxis" and "praxis-and-as-theory" which challenges whether one "can engage in blind praxis without theoretical analysis and vision" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 7).

Moreover, religious studies scholars have added further complexities to the ways in which individuals experience, and reflect upon, religious life. Robert Orsi challenges the use of "meaning-making" as a fitting concept for the reflective process, arguing that it is a "distinctly modern, western preoccupation and a distinctly post-Enlightenment and intellectualist approach to religion" (Orsi 2005, p. 144). He further problematizes this notion:

"Another way of thinking about this is to say that the movement between life and meaning or between sacred and profane is not a straightforward one and that the meeting of the two often enough deepens pain, becomes the occasion for cruelty, catches persons and communities in stories that are made against them (or that are supremely oblivious of them in their own particularities), that may alienate them from their own lives, and that bear within them the power to undermine them and make them and the people around them miserable and confused". (Orsi, p. 144)

Orsi's acknowledgment of the challenges, tensions, and realities contained within the spaces between action and reflection, and his questioning of the "meaning-making" construct, are layered in forms that extend beyond most field education frameworks. Theological field educators must continue to expand both our language of, and schemas for, teaching theological reflection on practice as it relates to ministry and leadership formation.

Figuratively, it might be proffered that the entirety of the theological curriculum is focused on theological *reflection*, though its relationship to action/practice is less realized due to the nature of western education more broadly. Schools like Iliff, whose student population includes individuals from increasingly varied religious and spiritual backgrounds and identities, have endeavored to teach reflective methods beyond the strictly *theological*. Newer constructs and accompanying terminologies such as reflective believing (Foley 2015) and interpretation (Pak 2020) have helped in this expansion beyond Christian

hermeneutical frames. In Iliff's context, we have developed and utilized the phrase *integrative reflection* for this process in the field education seminar. This nomenclature allows for a breadth of religious and spiritual exploration of symbols, texts, and themes related to an individuals' beliefs (and nonbeliefs) and actions, while at the same time still relying upon the general practical theological process outlined previously. Su Yon Pak articulates, "Students are asked to integrate academic knowledge and practical wisdom of field-based learning. They are asked to integrate their lives, their social locations, their vocations, and their spiritual practices as they exercise a critical intersubjectivity of power and privilege" (Pak 2020, p. 205). Adapting Thomas Groome's six-movement reflection process from his work *Sharing Faith* (Groome 1991), Iliff students engage each movement both reflexively (as individuals) and communally (as related to their site) as follows:

- Movement 1: Describe a specific experience or event in internship that generates theological, religious, spiritual, or moral questions or issues. *What is going on (on the surface)?*
- Movement 2: Describe current practices related to the situation or experience. *What is going on (below the surface)?*
- Movement 3: Drawing on your prior educational training, professional experience, and/or learnings from other classes at Iliff, engage in critical reflection on the situation. *Why is this going on?*
- Movement 4: Engage a resource (or resources) from a religious, spiritual, or wisdom tradition. This could be a sacred text, historical and liturgical source, and/or theological/spiritual resource or vision for flourishing that might be able to speak to the experience or event and its resulting questions or issues. *According to this wisdom/tradition, what should or ought to be going on?*
- Movement 5: Engage in critical dialogue between the theological, religious, spiritual, or moral question/issue raised in movement 1 and what should be going on (movement 4). *How do the tradition and current experience inform and challenge one another?*
- Movement 6: Describe proposed actions or responses given new wisdom or insights. *What might be the next right step(s)?* (Turpin and Lizardy-Hajbi 2019)

In particular, Movements 3 and 4 offer opportunities for students to practice integration across the theological curriculum in conversation with previous educational training and experience and the individual's religious, spiritual, or wisdom tradition(s). Students have drawn upon texts, symbols, themes, poetry, art, videos, and song lyrics for these integrative reflections, resulting in transformative, praxical, personal, and vocational insights both within and beyond Christian theological traditions. By drawing upon the rich complexities across disciplines for what reflection and reflective action might encompass, this expanded bridge is better equipped to support an increasingly diverse student body, related not only to belief and practice but also to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, etc.

## 5. Bridges of Formation

People who participated in the crossings (both attempted and completed) of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March 1965 were forever shaped by their embodied, symbolic actions. On March 25, after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a successful march across the bridge just days after the events of Bloody Sunday, King delivered his famous "How Long, Not Long" speech in which he declared, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (Wallenfeldt 2015, para. 12–13). Embodied reflection (and reflective embodiment) results in formation and transformation across the theological education curriculum. Within contextual education, formation traditionally has been referred to as the shaping of pastoral imagination that "integrates knowledge and skill, moral integrity, and religious commitment in the roles, relationships, and responsibilities they will be assuming in clergy practice" (Foster et al. 2006, p. 13). With the acknowledgment that this kind of professional formation is a lifelong process, it is important to focus on the

particularities of this process as they occur during one's time in seminary, yet must be broadened to encompass ministry leadership formation beyond only the pastoral.

Ultimately, formation—in one shape or another—functions as the bridge across the whole of theological education. It remains the defining purpose of any seminary, though individual institutions (and disciplines) may prioritize a particular type of formation over another (e.g., professional, personal, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, embodied, or other). Daniel Aleshire, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), forecasts that the model of education for the future will evolve toward the *spiritually* formational, particularly for Protestant freestanding schools that historically have prioritized abilities to interpret texts, increased awareness and critical thinking about historical and contemporary contexts, and the nurturing of professional performance in public clergy roles (Aleshire 2018, pp. 32, 35). From 2018 to 2020, the ATS itself undertook a process of re-envisioning the *Standards and Procedures* by which all member schools in North America receive accreditation, with the language of student formation taking a more explicit and central presence within the new *Standards* (as coupled with student learning):

“Standard 3: Theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation. Consistent with their missions and religious identities, theological schools give appropriate attention to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation”. (The Commission on Accrediting 2020, p. 3)

Many schools are creating more integrative course offerings that invite students into a greater holistic sense of formation. For example, at Iliff there are three required formational courses for professional master's degree programs: (1) A first-year, yearlong, cohort-based Identity, Power, and Vocation in Community course, (2) a one-term, team-taught interdisciplinary course focused on a timely theme that orients individuals to theological education, and (3) a yearlong, cohort-based internship seminar taught by experienced ministry and nonprofit leaders and centered on student site-based learning. As director of the Office of Professional Formation at Iliff, which largely focuses on the contextual educational aspects of student formation, I have been intentional in connecting the department's work to the Identity, Power and Vocation in Community course, defining professional formation itself as “sustained development and expression of self in relationship to:

- Identity—social, cultural, religious, and spiritual identities and how these are contextually drawn upon and lived out in relationships of power, privilege, and difference;
- Vocation—one's intentional and reflexive being and doing in the world; and
- Community—the people, places, and spaces with which vocation is expressed and embodied” (Lizardy-Hajbi 2019a).

In addition, internship learning outcomes build upon the outcomes of that same first-year course, inviting contextual education students “to cultivate capacities for embodying practical-prophetic leadership in community, including intellectual knowledge, emotional and spiritual awareness, situational skills and wisdom, relational and intercultural adeptness, and prophetic voice and action toward community transformation, care, justice, and peace” (Lizardy-Hajbi 2019b, #1). By bridging definitions and learnings across formational courses, students are better able to make connections among content areas throughout their seminary journeys, integrating more saliently various theories and practices toward expanded pastoral imaginations.

## 6. Bridging Worlds through Theological Field Education

Bridges as material and symbolic sites of transformation are not without their stressors and tension points. Contextual education as the nexus of learning in a theological education curriculum often becomes “a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds” (Anzaldúa 1983, p. 205). However, this also extends beyond the realm of the academy, as “field education programs are generally designed as a bridge between seminary and the congregation or other sites of clergy practice” (Foster et al. 2006, p. 296). As the nature

and function of religion continues to shift in the public square, and as denominations and religious communities seek ways to respond to these broader societal changes, so, too, must field educators and their seminaries explore adaptive and integrative curricula and pedagogies to meet the needs of an increasingly tumultuous world.

Even as theological field educators often lead their schools in specific kinds of bridging activities, we must continue making increased, intentional connections across other disciplines. We have relied too long on students to make those connections for themselves without the aid of a better-integrated curriculum, and as a result, integration may not occur for students in the ways we would hope. Claiming our role as bridges more fully, even as our work is sometimes minimized within the academy, requires a level of courage and resilience that we hope is also being formed in our students through the educational process. Might we, too, rise to the occasion for the sake of transformation?

Moreover, part of this bridging role for contextual educators requires us to call upon our colleagues in other disciplines to join us in bridging worlds, inviting partnerships that are more creative and explicit about embodiment, integrative reflection, and holistic formation within and beyond existing curricula (thus eliminating the false dichotomy between the academic paradigm and the clergy paradigm) (Miller-McLemore 2007). How might field education outcomes, frameworks, and practices be integrated within biblical studies, ethics, history, and theology courses? Particularly in the team-taught interdisciplinary courses at Iliff, faculty have been experimenting with site visits and other experiential learning opportunities, with students noting that these experiences made the subject matter “come alive” for them in unexpected ways.

An eschatological hope may be the elimination of a need for bridges entirely, or at least more organically seamless developments of theological knowledge that do not presume chasms between theory and practice or individual disciplines. The Edmund Pettus Bridge connecting Selma and Montgomery remains for us an enduring reminder that transformation is possible but rarely achieved without struggle, several attempts, and others journeying alongside us who are committed similarly to the cause. Ultimately, embracing more wholeheartedly our collective role as bridges can lead to sites of creative resistance and embodied *phronesis* for all who are engaged both within and beyond theological education.

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