

Partnered learning in seminary field education

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Successful collaborative leadership in ministry requires skills and foundations that are often established during seminary formation. With seminary faculty needing to facilitate more personal and community accompaniment of students, partnered



learning in theological field education is a good option. Rooted in gospel teaching, and proven through years of research, partnering students in the field has shown to increase learning engagement and accountability.

Theological field education is a fundamental element in the intentional formation of an ordained minister. Excellent field education experiences are more than schooling or job training; they are “first and foremost cooperation with the grace of God.”¹

Field education can provide an environment where seminarians deepen their response to God’s vocational call and further develop their ministerial competencies.

Yet the formation of a seminarian does not occur in isolation. Just as exemplary academics and athletes require proper coaching and teamwork, seminarians should be accompanied through their learning with modeling from peers and expert mentors. Field education frequently involves the partnership of a whole parish community, with the influence of individual field supervisors often more important than the institutional assignment itself.

*“He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs.”
(Mark 6:7)*

In the most recent document on seminary formation from the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, it is noted that

personal and community accompaniment is primary.² While personal accompaniment focuses on the relationship between the seminarian and the faculty, “a healthy

pedagogy of formation will not neglect to pay attention to the experience and dynamic of the group.”³ Seminarians cannot be fully formed apart from community. As the writer of Hebrews states:

“Let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24–25).

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2006), 68.

² Congregation for the Clergy, *Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (S.I.: Catholic Truth Society, 2017), 44–52.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

Jesus instructed the early disciples on the importance of communal life to promote love and good works. The original meaning of the word “promote” referred to a prodding or aggravating action of encouragement suggesting more than simply existing together, but active partnership, as promoted by St. Paul. Writing to the Philippians, Paul used the word *koinonia*, which expresses a deeper fellowship than mere association. He was not giving thanks for people just showing up, but rather for their active participation and partnership in spiritual and pastoral growth.

Partnered learning in practice

While the idea of collaborative learning on a "horizontal plane" or through "shared endeavors" has been a part of the institutional outcomes at Saint Mary Seminary in Cleveland, Ohio, for several years, only recently has it also received intentional focus within field education. Just as Jesus sent his apostles out in pairs, the first two years of seminary field education are now designed to promote gospel pairing and partnership.

During the first year of field education, seminarians are assigned in pairs to lead parish-based, small group faith formation sessions. They prepare for each session by praying together, planning reflections together, and then offering fraternal guidance and correction at the end of the session.

The second year of theological field education is focused on clinical pastoral care and catechesis. The seminarians are partnered together as they visit the sick and teach in grade school and high school classrooms. In clinical pastoral care, seminarians visit patients in pairs and then engage in a group didactic verbatim with the pastoral care supervisor to uncover theological and formational learning. In the classroom, one seminarian will teach the lesson while the other observes and assists. After the completion of the lesson, the paired seminarians meet with the classroom teacher to share their observations, receive feedback, and discuss their next lesson.

Previously when seminarians taught alone it often took several lessons to move beyond their comfort zone. But

partnered learning seems to offer greater security for risk-taking, and higher transfer of learning between students. Frequently the seminarian who observed a partner's lesson one week immediately incorporated the new learning into their own lesson the following week.

After the first year of utilizing the partnered learning program, student evaluations revealed that, though the seminarians were essentially doing half the ministry or teaching as before, they were retaining and applying twice as much from the experience. Instead of climbing the learning curve on their own, the opportunity to partner with another seminarian gave them insights that they may not have immediately realized—thus increasing their speed to competency.

Essential elements

Just as in the sending of the disciples, partnered learning requires some essential elements that aide in the success of the program: trust, engagement, commitment, and accountability.

Often when group work is mentioned on a course syllabus the first reaction by students is disapproval. Especially in our individualistic culture, there is a tendency toward complete responsibility for our own learning. Suggesting that experiences and grades are partly dependent on someone else requires a deeper level of trust between the students and their instructor.

To facilitate trust, partnerships are rotated throughout the semester so students are not assigned to a specific partner for more than a month. This helps reduce any anxiety of working with a partner with a significantly different ministerial style. These rotations also increase engagement and commitment from the seminarians. During exit interviews, seminarians have revealed an interdependence suggesting they are more committed and engaged in working with a partner because of the clearly defined shared goal.

A possible danger of partnered learning is a lessening of individual accountability for achieving the required learning objectives. Just as in a classroom environment, some

students can rely too heavily on their partner's abilities and less on their own, resulting in less individual engagement. Experience has shown, however, that seminarians show higher levels of attendance and engagement in their field assignments with partnered learning.

Conclusion

Seminary formation must be prepared to ordain ministers with the skills and tools to address the leadership needs in our churches today, and those which will occur over the next several years. With fewer ordained ministers available and an increase in ministerial responsibilities, the foundational practice of partnered learning takes on a more significant role for achieving Jesus' missionary

mandate. Whether in formal collaborative relationships with other priests, or informal partnerships among parishioners and members of the community, future leaders must be able to blend individual and collective efforts to share the Gospel.

As the seminary prepares for another year of partnered learning in field education, additional efforts will be made to evaluate the process. As Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs to accompany one another in teaching and preaching, partnered learning continues to offer a solid pedagogical model for seminary formation, and a foundation for continuing education of ordained ministers.



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