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Authentic Assessment, Ministerial Formation, and the Video Camera

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In theological education, students who go to school online are frequently students who remain at home throughout their degree programs serving in faith communities they know well. This reality affects their formation and affects how teachers approach it. There are some advantages to the situation. As Elaine Ramshaw writes about teaching pastoral care online: “The fact that many of the students are also concurrently doing what one might call ‘embedded’ parish work, and that some of them are the pastoral leaders of their congregations, can be a plus for teaching in any of the practical fields.”^[i] For example, in a class on pastoral leadership I might teach students how to lead decision-making via consensus process. An assignment option for that class might then be to lead their church board through consensus process. Assignments carried out in students’ ministry contexts represent what in higher education are called “authentic assessments.” Defined as real-world activities mirroring the very sorts of tasks students will practice in the professions for which they are preparing, authentic assessments are widely valued for their role in formation. They are also sometimes perceived to be tricky to create. But when online students can simply turn a camera on in the place they already work, authentic assessment becomes easier.

I have learned several ways to take advantage of the video camera in assessing ministerial formation. The first thing I tell students is that because it is their development I care about, I will be watching and listening to *them*, not their congregants. They should train the camera on themselves and not worry about capturing everybody on film. They will upload the video to a

secure channel, I will be the only one viewing it, and they can delete it once I have done so. Moreover, I tell them, I'm not assessing their congregants. Activities do not have to go perfectly for me to get a sense of students' leadership abilities. Whether or not, for example, their board actually reaches consensus on a decision is not the point. These reminders help students help their folks to relax, act naturally, and forget about the camera. The hope is that I will, in fact, see a truly authentic ministry event.

It appears to work. The video camera becomes quite literally like a fly on a wall that ceases to be noticed after a while. Therefore, filming has certain advantages over direct personal observation of students, which in face-to-face education is often considered the ideal way to assess student formation.

The second thing I tell students is that they must watch their videos. I was surprised when I first started teaching online to discover how often they did not. I appreciate the self-consciousness and even pain associated with seeing a tape of oneself, but one of the best ways to learn how to be a minister is to watch oneself in the act of ministering. Videotaping uniquely allows for this kind of learning.

The third thing I tell my students is that by watching a video of them in action, I will learn more about their context and gain appreciation for the challenges they face. The videos give me access, after all, not only to students whom I would never see otherwise because of distance, but also to real conversations being held in real church parlors, basements, and Sunday School rooms. It doesn't get more 'authentic' than watching a bunch of folks sitting around a table sipping Diet Cokes, quieting fussy babies, and occasionally digressing from the exercise at hand to rehash last night's big game.

Watching the videos makes me realize how difficult the skills I've taught in class can be when practiced authentically. I cannot help but see what goes on. I see all the distractions and interruptions that come with trying to get church folk to have a serious conversation. I've watched my students struggle to manage dominant personalities, deflect obvious attempts at alternative agendas, and finish exercises in time to get to the second service. I have even watched somebody suffer a stroke in the middle of a meeting. A final advantage of authentic assessment via videotape is that teachers come to appreciate the true breadth and complexity of ministerial formation.

[i] Elaine Ramshaw, "Reflections on Teaching Pastoral Care Online," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, Volume 31 (2011), 62. This entire volume of *Reflective Practice* is dedicated to formation and supervision in a digital age.

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