Every Context Tells a Story: Teaching the Art of Listening to People and Place

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Abstract

Every context tells a story, and listening to people and place is an essential skill that emerging ministry practitioners must learn in order to engage in transformative and sustained ministry practice. This article presents a field education curriculum at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary grounded in a hermeneutic of accompaniment. Through Gemba walks, listening conversations, power analysis, asset mapping, and communal storytelling, students learn to listen to people and place, joining the story God is already unfolding in their ministry context.

Keywords: Context, Hermeneutic from below, Listening

Misty Bilodeau, a lead in *Homestead Rescue*, one of my favorite TV reality shows, built the most creative veggie garden on the Big Island of Hawaii I've ever seen: a canoe-shaped trough suspended between two trees. The goal was to prevent an infestation of slugs that leave a life-threatening bacterium behind in their trails on vegetation. Reflecting on her creative idea, she notes:

> What I love about what we do is we end up in all types of climates, with all types of people and all types of problems. And it's only until you're in the moment, looking around and you start to really examine the situation, that you can come up with a solution.[1]

Misty and her family travel all over the United States offering practical support for homesteading families. Any given episode could see them trying to find a clean water supply in a desert, building rock walls to prevent floods in a tropical rainforest, or harnessing solar and wind for sustainable power in the high plains of the western United States. Their goal is always the same—to join with homesteading families to provide sustainable solutions and opportunities for thriving. They do this by listening carefully to both people and place, offering their homesteading expertise in response to what the context has to tell them.

I love this show not only because it feeds my fantasy of one day having land, chickens, and more tomatoes than I can eat but also because it reflects one of my grounding principles in contextual education. Every context tells a story, and listening to people and place is an essential skill emerging ministry practitioners must learn in order

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to engage in transformative and sustained ministry practice. This is particularly important considering the transient nature of ministry positions and the complex ministry landscape that demands multivocational skills, adaptability, and innovation. As such, I feel compelled to design contextual education curricula that will equip students for flourishing in whatever context they find themselves throughout their ministry career. This article addresses both the practical skills and the theological underpinnings of the curriculum I designed for the master of divinity field education course at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. At its heart is my thesis: ministry practice requires deep listening to people and place and the skills to analyze one's context to hear and respond to the transforming story God is already unfolding there.[2]

THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING: A HERMENEUTIC OF ACCOMPANIMENT

The grounding hermeneutic for the contextual education curriculum at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and specifically for the field education assignment, is a hermeneutic of accompaniment.[3] Typically, a hermeneutic of accompaniment is employed for the interpretation of Scripture or approaches to theology. A hermeneutic of accompaniment is grounded in the biblical witness of God's non-neutrality in relationship to those who occupy the "edges" of society. The late Bishop Desmond Tutu stated, "We have a God who does take sides . . . our God is the God of Underdogs, who will not let us forget the widow and the orphan."[4] As such, we who worship and seek to reflect this God should likewise have concern for those who are on the edges, the oppressed and the weak.[5] Theologian Dennis Jacobsen suggests that for Christians who do not live with the daily reality of poverty, "The challenge is to view the world as it is from the underside, from the bottom, from the vantage point of the poor."[6] I would go further and say that we cannot begin to adopt a hermeneutic of accompaniment in our practice of ministry without being in relationship with those embedded in and belonging to a community. John Wesley emphasized the practice of visiting the poor, revealing that without it "no real understanding of the plight of the poor is possible. Without it, the nerve of compassion is cut and the possibility of a pertinent and transforming praxis is lost."[7] Jesus offers the greatest witness to this hermeneutical approach through his own practice of listening deeply to and being in relationship with the people, *allowing them to shape his ministry, teaching and witness*.

In practicing a hermeneutic of accompaniment, we must be "where Jesus would be, this one who was vilified for being the friend of sinners."[8] Donald Kraybill states that although Jesus' ordination wasn't certified through proper channels, the crowds "felt the authenticity of his message and gave it grass-roots accreditation."[9] Placing ourselves in relationship with those imbedded in, a part of, and belonging to the context not only awakens us to their power but affords us the credibility to act with them and use our power in conjunction with theirs to bring about transformation. Our relationship with them is the source of our credentialing. Without that relationship, we may only have

patriarchy, paternalism, and suspicion (the foundations of colonialism). Or, at the very least, we cause more harm than good.

A hermeneutic of accompaniment in the context of contextual education invites us to imagine God's preference for the people and story of a place as shaping and influencing the leadership, teaching, and witness of the student. While not all people in any particular context are necessarily marginalized or poor, the principle of listening to and being in relationship with those who are embedded in and belong to a context stands. In this hermeneutical approach, there is an emphasis on co-learning through relationship, that is, on asking, "What can we mutually learn together and from each other?" Additionally, this hermeneutic emphasizes that individual and social transformation is born out of the stories, experiences, and wisdom of those who are actually experiencing the conditions in need of transformation. Individual and social transformation occurs, therefore, from the roots or the ground up, within the context of mutual connection. This is not a colonial approach, in which the student enters the context assuming they already know what is best for that place and its people, imposing their own will on the context. Rather, the student trusts the context to reveal its own pathway to transformation and flourishing. The student is called to enter the story of a context in order to join with what is already unfolding, lending their gifts and graces to the work of the people and place. One of the ways we encourage students to do this is to invite people from their field education context to join them in the work of their field education assignment. In this way, they are enacting the hermeneutic of accompaniment and creating a culture of learning. They are also practicing leadership skills (both relational and pedagogical) they will need to flourish in ministry practice. They are leading and learning at the same time.[10]

THE FIELD EDUCATION ASSIGNMENT

Students at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary learn the skills of a hermeneutic of accompaniment through the field education assignment, which has six components. These components include skills from various disciplines (corporate, community organizing, ecclesiastical, educational), along with resources that teach the student how to listen deeply to the story in their context. God is already unfolding a story in each student's context and will continue to unfold that story long after the student has left. The student's role is to listen deeply to that story, seeking to understand what is unfolding, analyzing both people and place. They are then to enter that ongoing story with their own unique story, to join with the context in transformative ministry practice.

Before students begin the assignment, they must ask themselves: How is *God* at work in this place? How might I best join in God's purposes for this place, in partnership with its people? About half of our students taking the field education course are already employed at their field education placements. The other half have only an initial introduction to their placements. Regardless of their previous knowledge of their context, they are to ask themselves these questions based on whatever initial perceptions they

may have. We want the student to reflect, initially, on what they perceive God's presence in their context to be. We remind them throughout the assignment to take notes on their reflections, learnings, and observations. This includes thick, rich description. They are not to rely on their memories but rather are to enter a process of participatory action research and ethnography, paying close attention to detail, description, impression, and environment.

Gemba Walks

The first component of the assignment is a series of observational walks. We call these "Gemba walks," a term borrowed from the Toyota Motor Company. Taiichi Ohno, inventor of the Toyota Production System and V.P. of Engineering, developed the Gemba walk as way for management to observe the manufacturing process for the purpose of improving flow and eliminating waste on the production line. Gemba (現場) is the Japanese word for "the place where things are happening" or "the real place." Gemba walks are extensively used in the corporate world to improve manufacturing processes (and, tangentially, improve the working experiences of their employees and the products they produce). The principles of this corporate management practice align well with the intentions of the field education assignment, which are to engage the student in the process of deep observation for the sake of seeking a path to tangible communal improvement. From a theological perspective, Gemba walks are a tool or skill our students can use to fulfill our shared call to bring about the realm of God in all places. To take a Gemba walk is to respectfully observe, ask questions, collect data, and examine what is happening in a particular place or context. It is to take a posture of humility and learning for the sake of finding ways to transform or improve.[11]

Students are asked to go on three observational walks in their context. We ask students to work with their supervisor-mentors to define the parameters of their context. For some, this means the church, nonprofit, or hospital where they are placed. For others, it is the specific ministry or department of their placement or even the wider community surrounding their placement. Students are asked to observe the context, community, and systems of their placement at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The purpose of these walks is to ponder these questions: What is the essence of "ministry" in this place? and What are the forms by which it is manifested? They are to refrain from making or offering judgments, suggestions, solutions, or ministry ideas. Instead, they are to use the principles of Gemba (Go and See, Ask, and Show Respect) to ponder the people and place.

For the first Gemba walk, students (along with participants from their context) are to observe an event that speaks to the mission of that placement, taking notes on what they observe. This is the micro level. Students are to pay attention to details, impressions, movements, context, texture, and elements (human or otherwise). They are to ask themselves: What do I see? Who do I see? What are they doing? What is the condition of

the surroundings? What is present in the surroundings? How do my social identity and social location inform what I see and don't see?

The second Gemba walk is a literal walk around their placement, inside and outside the building. This is the mezzo level. Again, they are to observe and take detailed notes, asking themselves; What kind of things go on here? What elements exist? What is creating value? What isn't creating value?

The third Gemba walk expands their observation to the macro level. For most, this is a two- to three-block radius of their context, but it may be even wider than that. Again, they are to observe and take detailed notes on what they see, identifying especially the elements that exist (commercial, residential, municipal, manufacturing, educational, etc.). They must ask themselves: What kind of things go on here? What assets exist? What is creating value? What isn't creating value (or what is creating waste)? Who do I see? What are they doing? What is the condition of the surroundings? Once they have completed their Gemba walks, they are to compare notes with their "walking" companions and include their companions' observations in their notes.

Listening Conversations

The second component of the field education assignment is a series of one-on-one listening conversations. This skill is widely used in the field of community organizing and is often called an individual meeting.[12] Michael Gecan of the Industrial Areas Foundation states that the aim of these meetings "is to initiate a public relationship with another person"[13] and asserts that the first assumption in carrying out these individual meetings is that "the other person is worth listening to."[14] This assumption is based on the long tradition in Christian theology of a God who not only speaks but listens. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that "the first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as the love of God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them."[15] Listening, like observing, is at the heart of understanding the context in which one is placed and is the beginning of learning how to integrate oneself into the story that is already unfolding there. The aim of the listening conversation in this assignment goes further than Gecan suggests. We hope for the students to begin piecing together not only the individual stories of those connected with their context but to also imagine the collective story God is telling about that place and its people.

We teach our students the basics of how to conduct an individual meeting or listening conversation. This includes having a listening conversation modeled for them by their peer group facilitators and being supplied with a template on how to conduct a listening conversation, along with sample questions. They are asked to meet with five individuals:

- A staff person at the placement (this person cannot be the student's supervisor-mentor).

- A person who is deeply embedded and invested in the placement and its mission.
- A person who is on the periphery or not deeply invested in the placement and its mission.
- A person who can tell the Story or the HiStory/HerStory/TheyStory of the placement.
- A person who they were recommended to speak to by one of the people above.

The idea of meeting with these categories of people is to allow insight into all levels of connection to the context, along with offering the student practice in listening to people who may not be fully sympathetic to the mission of the placement. As with all individual meetings or listening conversations, the students start and end the meeting on time, thank the person who shared their story, and take detailed notes on the meeting once it is over. We emphasize the importance of listening empathetically and respectfully, being aware of the cost to the speaker of having to share their story.[16] We also encourage the student to teach this skill to those in their placement so that they too can engage in listening conversations. This hopefully becomes a spiritual practice for both the student and those in their placement.

Digging Deeper

The third component of the assignment is to either do a census data analysis using the resources of a web-based zip code census query or do a photo story, collecting photos (archival and new) of their placement to compile a story in pictures. Either option offers the students an opportunity to dig deeper into the granularities of their placement, whether that be through raw data or through the interpretive lens of pictures. Again, we are encouraging the students to use the resources available to them to "listen" to the history, nature, and character of the context in which they are placed. They are to dig beneath the surface level of their context's story, finding the hidden factors and narratives often missing from an initial impression. We call this the iceberg exercise, acknowledging that an iceberg hides most of its mass below the surface.

Power Analysis and Asset Mapping

The fourth component of the assignment is doing a power analysis and an asset map. For both the power analysis and the asset mapping exercises, we ask students to invite people in their context to join them in the learning process. Again, we are asking students to lead and learn at the same time, which is a hallmark of an apprenticeship-style internship.

The power analysis is "a relational map of the way an institution really functions and how that institution actually interacts with other institutions [or within itself] in the real world."[17] We want students to learn how power moves and works in their context, the character of the leaders' influence, and the relational intricacies of the community. This requires the student to take an honest accounting of the nature of power in their context, seeking to understand before seeking to change. With this knowledge, the

student will be able to navigate the complexities of leading people, particularly when seeking to make transformative decisions. Additionally, a power analysis allows the student to respectfully and empathetically navigate the roles people play in their context, as well as the perceived and actual power they inhabit. Without a power analysis, the student will be lost and will be very likely to make costly relational and leadership mistakes.

Asset mapping is the assessment of the capacities, skills, and assets of a context: people, and place. The opposite of an asset (or capacity) approach to ministry practice is a need-driven approach, wherein a context's story and our response to that story is based on the needs, problems, and deficiencies of a people and place. Adopting a needs-based approach to ministry practice leads to what is known as client-based communities, wherein the people of a community are defined only by their needs. We become, as Jacobsen suggests, a do-gooder, "always 'for' the other not 'with' the other. . . . The do-gooder needs the powerlessness of the other in order to feel powerful. . . . [I]f the powerless were empowered, what would the do-gooder do?"[18] Those supporting the community rely on its remaining deficient. In fact, the survival of entire institutions depends on the continuation of need in a community.[19]

From a community development perspective, an asset-based approach to ministry practice relies on the truth that "significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort."[20] This approach is focused on the capacity of a context (individuals, institutions, businesses, infrastructure, landscape, etc.). It is also internally focused. That is, it relies on the community itself to produce the solutions needed for thriving, stressing the "primacy of local definition, investment, creativity, hope and control."[21] Many practitioners and saints have said the same thing: sustainable, flourishing transformation must come from the people.[22] It must also be relationship driven. For our students who hope to engage in ministry practice within the particularities of a context, they must not only seek to understand the context (through listening, observation, and analysis) but also engage in building relationships with the people and place. Building trust, friendship, loyalty, understanding, kinship, and kindness are vital to sustaining a vibrant, transformative, and effective ministry practice. Without thriving relationships, no amount of contextual data or analysis will enable a student to be effective in ministry practice.

Hosting a Potluck

This leads to the necessity of another component of the field education assignment. We ask students to host a potluck at the end of their placement term.[23] While this is certainly an opportunity for us to assess the student's ability to administer the planning and production of a potluck (a relatively low bar for assessing leadership skills), the real intent of the potluck is to celebrate the gifts of the context and offer gratitude to the people with

whom the student has been ministering and learning. The celebration and expression of gratitude take place around a sacred meal, the sharing of assets and gifts from all those present, in a democratic and community-based manner. We encourage students to share what they have learned from their assignment at this sacred meal, thereby continuing to add to the story of their context.

Telling the Story

The potluck is not the only place where students share the story of their context. Students are asked to report, in whatever modality most accurately tells the story, to their peer group.[24] They are to ask themselves again, How is God at work in this place? How might I best join in God's purposes for this place, in partnership with its people? Students must reflect on what has changed since they asked themselves these questions at the beginning of the assignment. Additionally, students share not only the story of their context but reflect on the process of listening, learning, observing, and analyzing. The peer group acts a sacred bowl for holding these contextual stories, along with the feelings, thoughts, conflicts, curiosities, and complexities that arise from engaging in this work. Thus, students inherently learn the importance of both communal storytelling and communal listening as theological acts. Both in their peer groups and at their placements, students are encouraged to theologically reflect on how their context's story interacts, inhabits, and inhibits God's salvation story. They are encouraged to reflect on the particularities of each context's story, along with the universal truths that emerge from their collective experience. This integration is critical to these emerging practitioners as they navigate the complexities of ministry practice in our modern world.

CONCLUSION

When the students complete this assignment, they are often astounded by what they have learned. This is particularly true for those who have already been in ministry practice at their placements for some time before doing the assignment. What often emerges for these students is the discovery of patterns in the stories/histories of their context, along with insights into the places and people that need to be healed (or at least heard) in order for transformation to occur. Students have reported that the assignment helped them to listen to what was said and also listen for what was unsaid, along with allowing them to see how God was working in their context outside of their personal view.[25] Student Edumakono Zieto, serving at Catholic Charities in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, offered this comprehensive and representative reflection on the assignment:

> The tools and skills I developed through the Field Education Assignment significantly enhanced my capacity to understand, listen to, and analyze my ministry context. First, practicing intentional observation enabled me to move beyond assumptions and identify patterns of behavior, power dynamics, and unspoken needs within the Catholic Charities

> agency and the surrounding community. Instead of reacting immediately, I learned to pause and consider what was occurring beneath the surface.
>
> Second, deep listening skills such as active listening, open-ended questioning, and reflective feedback enhanced my awareness of how individuals articulate their experiences, particularly those from marginalized or trauma-affected backgrounds. These skills enabled me to attend to both spoken and unspoken communication, thereby revealing the emotional, spiritual, and cultural realities shaping the ministry context.
>
> Third, employing contextual analysis tools such as cultural exegesis, demographic analysis, and theological reflection allowed me to interpret ministry experiences with greater critical insight. I recognized how social factors, including migration, economic stress, family systems, and faith traditions, intersect with spiritual formation and pastoral care. This perspective shifted my understanding of challenges from individual issues to systemic and contextual phenomena.
>
> Additionally, engaging in reflective practices such as journaling, supervision, and peer feedback enabled me to connect lived ministry experiences with theological frameworks. This integration clarified my pastoral identity and supported my discernment of how God is present in the specific realities of my ministry setting.[26]

Edumakono's experience is echoed in the experiences of other students. Paul Johnson, who worked with the unhoused in Edinburgh, Scotland, noted the personal transformation that occurs through practicing deep listening. He shared that being asked to listen and observe helped him to learn that

> being a healing presence is the goal, not perfection. I learned from this experience that some people I unconsciously avoid because of their outward appearance were people I came to love and engage in mutual transformation. As I am a reformed introvert, I often find these engagements take conscious effort and attention.

Similarly, student Tae Yoon Kim, who was placed at a diverse, suburban church, shared that the

> FE Assignments helped me to learn and understand contextual differences. As a Korean student, I always stayed within the Korean church's boundaries, even when I was in America, because I felt safe. However, through the Field Education, I had an opportunity to experience the local American Church. It helped me step outside my bubble because I was afraid before I started. But during the FE Assignment, I saw we are all the same people who need grace. I think it was helpful and transformed many aspects of my life by broadening my perspective and deepening my understanding of the United States of America as a Korean student.

These students discovered the beautiful truth so eloquently expressed by Mark Nepo: "To listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness to be changed by what we hear."[27] The students are changed; they deepen their skills and are transformed by the relationships they form. They begin to understand the power and wisdom of the people they serve, along with learning how to integrate their own power and wisdom in the story of their context.

Misty Bilodeau was right. She would not be able to effectively help homesteaders get the most from their land without first knowing the story of that land and its people. The beautiful byproduct of her work is the incredible love that emerges (grows, bursts forth, gushes out relentlessly) through the exchange of telling and listening. Our students experience that as well. And, ultimately, that is the story God is telling in each place amongst all people.

NOTES

[1] Misty Bilodeau, *Homestead Rescue*, season 8, episode 5, "Paradise in Peril," 2021, on Discovery.

[2] As a prerequisite for Contextual Education, all students must have completed some foundational courses, including a Sexual Ethics and Boundaries course. Additionally, students should have gone through a formational process that accompanies them in discerning their vocational identity and call, along with establishing a foundation of spiritual practices. Students also begin to learn how to tell their story and listen to the stories of others.

[3] Lisl Heymans Paul, "Doing Justice: Collaborative Inquiry, Laity in a Local Church and the Biblical Imperative to Do Justice" (DMin diss., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2015), abstract. With thanks to Rev. Dr. John Senior for the language of accompaniment.

[4] Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (Double Day, 2004), 66.

[5] Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 66.

[6] Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* (Fortress Press, 2017), chap. 1. Jacobsen goes on to say, "The status of the faithful Christian is always one of being an alien in a strange land, always feeling unease with the disease of the culture," chap. 1.

[7] Theodore Jennings Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Abingdon Press, 1990), 53.

[8] Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 66.

[9] Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald Press, 1990), 239.

[10] This assignment is only one part of the overall field education curriculum, which includes Ministry Practice, Learning and Serving Goals, Peer Group Theological and Vocation Formation, and Supervision-Mentoring.

[11] Gemba, "What Does Gemba Actually Mean?" https://www.gembasolutions.com/what-does-the-word-gemba-actually-mean/#:~:text=The%20literal%20translation%20for%20Gemba,such%20as%20the%20factory%20floor.

[12] The one-on-one format can be modified as appropriate. A former student from Myanmar told me that one-on-one conversations were not common in his culture, leading him to adapt this assignment by meeting in small groups with his parishioners. This kind of adaptation is essential to ensuring that the purpose of the assignment is not lost for the sake of completing it.

[13] Michael Gecan, *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal* (ACTA, 2008), 7.

[14] Gecan, *Effective Organizing*, 8.

[15] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper Press, 1954), 97.

[16] The idea of listening with empathy and respect is undergirded by the concept of "extractivism": based on lessons learned about how our practices of retrieving natural resources have resulted in detrimental environmental/social/communal costs to native populations, we must be mindful about how our retrieving or receiving of "data" from others might result in a cost to those to whom we are listening.
[17] Gecan, *Effective Organizing*, 13.
[18] Jacobsen, *Doing Justice*, chapter 2.
[19] John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (ACTA, 1993), 2–4.
[20] Kretzmann and Mcknight, *Building Communities*, 5.
[21] Kretzmann and Mcknight, *Building Communities*, 9.
[22] Those who have made this same point include Jesus, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, adrienne maree brown, Michael Gecan, Robert Linthicum, Martin Luther King Jr., John Kretzmann and John McKnight, Edward Chambers, Alexia Salvatierra, and Peter Heltzel.
[23] The idea for this came from the 2024 Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary Commence Address by Eboo Patel titled "The Power of a Potluck," timestamp 1:17–1:31, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcd6ZSajiq8.
[24] The modality of storytelling can be oral, written reflection, power point, photo story, etc. The peer group facilitators are the midwives to this storytelling, encouraging the students to accurately and effectively tell their stories.
[25] Anonymous response to Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary Course Evaluation Questionnaire for FE600, Fall 2025.
[26] The testimonies from students Edumakono Zetho, Paul Johnson, and Tae Yoon Kim were solicited from students in Fall 2025 and are quoted here with their permission.
[27] Mark Nepo, *The Exquisite Risk: Daring to Live an Authentic Life* (Crown, 2006), 5.