Tracing the Threads from Classroom to Community: Braiding Theological Imagination for Sustained Justice Work

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Abstract

Braiding is a restorative, creative act of care within African American culture, utilizing either natural hair or added extensions to achieve a specific vision. In this reflection, I argue that establishing a shared definition of social justice and leveraging local grassroots movements are the "essential threads" for sustaining justice beyond educational placements. Chaplains and educators can begin "braiding their own hair" by fostering collaborative definitions of justice that actively engage both students and community partners. In an even greater act of care, institutions can "add hair" by intentionally designing contextual education through a social justice lens. This approach deepens relationships between students and organizations, building the theological imagination necessary to propel students toward a sustained practice of vocationally integrative justice work.

Keywords: Dietra Wise Baker, Social justice, Social transformation

MY INTRODUCTION TO CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION

Wash and braid day at my house was always filled with excitement and anxiety. The process of detangling and greasing hair sometimes was painful, but the results were always worth the process. Only now do I appreciate my mom's greased-up legs as she tussled with me to part and braid my hair. Fresh braids are always beautiful, but they usually hurt for a few days. The best part of braiding is that the style never looks the same because everyone's hair texture and color, and especially each braider's technique, are slightly different. The braider's unique training and relationships will shape the braid differently, but it will surely be beautiful and reflect community and care.

In this article, like a braider, I'm gathering strands that I have experienced that can impact students' formation toward a long-haul commitment to social justice. Not every setting includes these strands, but I hope to share enough of my journey that you will be able to discover strands in your own context that can be braided to deepen your

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institutional commitments and deepen paths for students to incorporate social justice as a part of their lifelong vocations in ministry.

Eden Theological Seminary is a small Christian seminary of the United Church of Christ (a mainline Protestant denomination), located in the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri. Eden requires 550 hours of contextual education in the master of divinity degree, more than other accredited seminaries in the Association for Theological Schools. The seminary has centered contextual education as a distinguishing element in its educational programming. Eden also has a long history of alumni and professors known for their contributions to social justice, ethics, and theology in the public arena. Among the most notable are Walter Brueggemann, who earned his bachelor of divinity at Eden and later taught at Eden for over twenty-five years; Reinhold Niebuhr, who graduated from Eden in 1913; and contemporary social justice leaders like the Rev. Traci Blackmon and Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson, president of the Children's Defense Fund. I name these powerful roots in the lineage of this seminary because they are important to what I am trying to braid in the intersecting realms of contextual education and justice work.

Braiding or twisting involves taking existing strands and creating a new style. The twisting style and technique is unique to each braider/twister. In that spirit, let me share a little about my own lineage. First, I am an Eden graduate, having received my master of divinity degree here in 2006. This point is noteworthy as I have experienced the school both as a student and then for nineteen years as an adjunct professor and nearly six years as a full-time faculty member. My contextual education experience was transformative:; it became my full-time ministry after seminary for almost fifteen years. Finally, for the last ten years I have been a faith-based community organizer leading campaigns related to the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration reform. I am currently the lead organizer for a 501(c)(4) nonprofit lobbying organization; I directly lead electoral justice campaigns with Black women voters, elected officials, and candidates in Missouri, resulting in increased voter education among Black women and visibility for officials. While my concurrent vocations defy easy categorization, my colleagues call me a professor organizer. There are only a few of us professor-organizers in the academy, and we have no official academic guild.

Back to the braid. I want to start with some of my own powerful experiences with contextual education as a student at Eden. I served my home church as the youth minister during my first year in contextual education and seminary. One night before our chapel Bible study, another minister who was having problems in her marriage was visibly upset, acting entirely out of character. My supervisor, who served as a military chaplain, maintained his composure when he requested that I ask the leader to visit his office. I joined them in the office, where I expected him to take a get-yourself-together with the minister who was upset. Instead, I watched my contextual education supervisor remain a non-anxious presence. That moment taught me immeasurably important things about what it means to give pastoral care, what it means to provide pastoral care to leaders,

what it means to make space, and what it means to embody care. We can too often underestimate the apprenticeship apparatus of contextual education but watching and being present with mentors as they serve and lead is essential to achieving its goals.

In another of my experiences as a youth minister, Nia, a fifteen-year-old youth group member, was pregnant. Tragically, the hospital staff informed us that her baby was going to be stillborn. The whole situation was completely devastating to me. Nia gave birth to the baby and then asked me to hold and baptize the child. I froze and was unable to perform the rite. I was in the room with the baby, but I couldn't hold the baby. I was afraid that I would look at the dead baby and never unsee a dead baby. My supervisor then came in and, with no apparent problem, picked up and rocked the dead child, prayed, blessed, and baptized the baby. I am glad he was able to give Nia what she needed because I could not. That experience showed me that at times ministers are called to de-center their emotions and pain to take care of others.

During my second year of contextual education, I was assigned to the juvenile detention center. A senior chaplain showed me the ropes of chaplaincy in the prison system. As a chaplain caring for youth incarcerated in St. Louis juvenile detention centers, I observed numerous issues with the school, police, and court systems. This led to my call as an organizer in Metropolitan Congregations United's Break the Pipeline Campaign. Trying to organize churches to be concerned about justice led me back to the seminary. I am recognized as a social justice leader now, but it took at least fifteen years after seminary to get here. Could I have become an active leader in social transformation sooner? Could Eden's contextual education curriculum have contained intentional experiences that would have moved me toward a path of social transformational ministry during seminary, rather than my needing to be in pastoral care ministry for fifteen years to achieve the same end?

My central insight from my own experience of learning about social transformation did not immediately form me into a leader of social transformation. My seminary course work was an important foundation toward this leadership, and seeing racism in the context where I was doing ministry was vital. However, those experiences were not enough to carry out the ministry of justice beyond providing the theological mandate to do so. My student experience gave me beginning insights to further explore what was needed in forming seminarians into social justice ministerial leaders once I became the director of contextual education at Eden. I was interested in whether contextual education could be fertile ground for seeding social transformation deeper into the seminary curriculum. I believe this question is relevant to any program that has components of reflection, faculty, mentors, and practice alongside an educational commitment to social transformation. My reflection here is born out of my experiences as a faith-based community organizer and contextual education director in a progressive seminary.

First, social transformation is a central student learning outcome of Eden Seminary's curriculum. Many readers of this article may have similar institutional commitments. The learning outcome's description clearly states that we seek to resist and to lead the interruption of structural oppression. I realized that our social transformation student learning outcome assumes students and supervisors are clear about the definition of structural oppression, which, when eliminated, leads to social justice and social transformation. Early goals and evaluations completed by students and supervisors in our contextual education program showed their predominant understandings of response and leadership to structural oppression was through the work of social service rather than community organizing–oriented work. I discovered this while reviewing student learning goals and student and supervisor learning evaluations, which described in detail the mentored activities of students. Our students are required to have at least one goal for social transformation. The predominant activities in response to structural oppression were to do a sermon series, lead a book study, or participate in area feeding ministries. Many students and supervisors listed these activities rather than those of community organizing and other types of nonviolent resistance as structural responses to systemic oppression.

During my first four years as director of contextual education, I began a process of adjusting supervisors' training, student learning contracts, and student assignments to deepen everyone's understanding of the articulation of structural oppression in specific ministry contexts. I asked students to create goals that required them to design and resist or lead in relationship to what they discovered about pre-existing structural oppression in their contextual education settings. This was first done in our senior-level constitution cohort, so the syllabus was designed to discover one area of structural oppression in their ministry context in the first semester and to create and implement a response to that specific structural oppression in the second semester. I also implemented this careful reading of goals and evaluations with the first-and second-level students through Eden's summer seminar, which directly exposed students to structural oppression through readings, assignments to connect with grassroots campaigns, testimony of directly impacted people, anti-oppression training by experts, and in-class discussion designed to integrate theological content from their course and contextual education work.

Second, as a faith-based community organizer in progressive congregations, I witnessed the distance between the rhetoric of justice and sustained congregational witness for justice. Nathan Todd offers critical language and findings important to this conversation. He notes a difference between intellectually prioritizing social justice and acting for social justice: "Different patterns of prediction emerged for social justice prioritization and participation," which shows that "these two outcomes are related yet distinct aspects of social justice."[1] Todd emphasizes that identifying social justice as a priority or stated value in a congregation does not mean that community levels of participation match community levels of prioritization.

Third, Todd's study points to a lack of clarity in defining social justice. Social justice participation in his study was defined by one question: "Does your congregation participate directly in any programs to provide a community social service or promote peace and justice?" and 75 percent of participants answered yes to this question.[2] This question's broad focus and the multitude of ways in which survey respondents could interpret the terms "social service" and "peace and justice" demonstrates the lack of clarity in our culture and communities about definitions of social service and social justice. This reflects the need for more precise definitions of social justice and social service ministries to engage actual systems and policies of structural oppression. How will students learn strategies and practices to resist and lead social transformation if their social service strategies are never evaluated and marked as insufficient as tactics for social justice?

With these thoughts in mind, it is important to adequately define social justice and social transformation. This distinction is crucial to our discussion as it implies that incorporating social transformation into a curriculum should be accompanied by a community-driven approach to defining such transformation. Furthermore, we must evaluate which educational tools are or could be utilized not only for the growth of our students but also for the development of the network supporting them, recognizing that this network's formation is itself an ongoing process. The conversation is crucial as it shapes the future of our education programs and our shared hopes and collective mission for social transformation.

DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Social justice is the material pursuit of social transformation. For some, this pursuit is rooted in humanist values; for others, these values are rooted in faith practice. Meanwhile, some faith traditions, including the Christian tradition, can overemphasize life in heaven after death. Historically, life on Earth was ignored in specific Christian traditions to avoid ethical indictment of anti-human practices like slavery. Kelly Brown Douglas notes this practice in her book *The Black Christ*, where she advances a Christian worldview that counters this kind of spiritual bypassing of earthly life for a nebulous better life to come. In the Christian worldview she discusses, all conditions for a thriving humanity and creation are met with hospitable love, growth, and healing. All creatures' basic needs are met. She considers oppression the unjust vehicle of privilege and power granted to particular social groups.[3] In that context, social justice is the capacity of people to use their God-given privilege and power, the inalienable right of creaturehood, to coexist in a symbiotic relationship—not a parasitic relationship in which one must suffer and die for another to survive and thrive.

Let me offer a parable, a traditional organizer's perspective and definition of social justice. In a jungle, villagers keep rescuing babies from drowning in the river. One day a villager asks an important question: Who keeps putting babies in the river? Social justice

is what we achieve—the goals of our justice work—and social transformation is the process by which we achieve our goals of social justice. Often, I use the two terms interchangeably. Organizers often ask participants in their training program, What would you do if you saw a baby in the river? "Get the baby out of the river," many answer. Most work that does not directly benefit the church is "getting babies out of the river" ministry. It is relatively normal to respond to an immediately presenting crisis with a piecemeal, one-off solution. At the same time, we need people to go upstream to find out who is putting the babies in the river in the first place for a more systemic solution. Community organizing is sustaining attention, focus, and relationships that enable our communities to solve root-cause problems. There are clear solutions to many of our most challenging problems, but we often lack the political will or power, and sometimes both, to implement these solutions. Barak Obama, in his article on community organizing from his Chicago experience, emphasizes our lack of sustained energy.[4]

For example, many people are concerned with equitable education in our community. Public education is generally funded through property tax payments from homeowners. Communities with more homeowners provide more property tax income. This means that school funding is inherently unequal due to direct discriminatory practices to limit and control where black people can own homes. A simple solution to this problem is to collect all the property taxes and distribute funds based on the number of students in the state. However, this would mean taxes collected from wealthier neighborhoods (made wealthy by historical privilege and direct discrimination) would go into a common pool; schools in those areas would get the same funding as schools in areas with homes with lower property values and taxes, meaning that the rich would pay more for education than the poor. Those of us who desire this level of equity in educational funding don't have the political or moral power to complete this simple equity task, so social justice is again deferred.

Perhaps the most distinctive qualities of social transformation are hope and ongoing engagement. Social justice is not merely an event but a commitment to a vision of equity in which we partner with God to bring our vision into reality. We believe it is possible, and that it is coming. In *Making Space for Justice*, Michelle Moody-Adams says, "One of the most fundamental insights underwriting contemporary political iconoclasm is the idea that imagination helps constitute communities as political entities."[5] The relinquishment of a justice initiative may be more a sign of the relinquishment of hope and imagination than a sign of a vision of justice. Therefore, we nurture consistency and commitment to social justice in sustained action. Social transformation is not a one-time or occasional commitment but a community's pronouncement in word and deed to attend to this known practice and create tactics to bring it into being. Progressive seminary communities make a covenant with justice for all creation—to act as long as we live.

A comprehensive definition of social justice moves beyond focusing attention solely on immediate crises and evokes personal and community commitment to tangibly enter the struggle for human liberation. If social justice is the end, social transformation is the means. Simply naming and preaching about structural oppression is not a clear indication that we have entered a process that is aimed at leading, acting, or resisting structural oppression until we take concrete, tangible actions toward these ends. We may enter the struggle toward social justice because of our faith or because of our values. Once we are clear that we aim for material change in the community, we must design resources that support students' exposure to the work of social transformation that leads to social justice, deepening their and our commitment to the lifelong struggle for human freedom.

CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION AND ITS POTENTIAL ROLE IN FORMING SEMINARY STUDENTS FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION.

In her article "The Evolution of Contextual Field Education," Emily Click names three models of contextual education: reflection through supervision, reflection through the seminar, and reflection through curriculum integration.[6] In the reflection through supervision model, which prioritizes supervision and mentoring relationships, investing resources, and training, an expected site of revelation is in the exchanges between supervisor and student. This model emphasizes the importance of interpreting and reflecting upon contextualized experiences.[7]

As Click notes, the reflection through the seminar model is often led by teaching faculty and meets in an environment away from the contextual education site to develop student self-awareness, embolden student capacities for theological reflection, build student emotional intelligence, and encourage students to learn from their peers. The site of revelation is in the exchange between peers, faculty, and the student. In this model, practitioners seek exemplary texts for teaching theological reflection in training and evaluating seminar leaders.[8]

Finally, the reflection through curricular integration model "permeates educational culture and supplies experiences and reflective tools that vitalize the overall curriculum."[9] The critical question for contextual educators is how to deepen integrative learning opportunities for students throughout the entire curriculum. Formation programs in CPE, or in contextual education generally, contain the components of this model. Students practice, reflect, integrate, and return to practice. Reflection occurs in several formats: one on one with a supervisor, within a cohort in the seminar class, or at the contextual education site with an interdisciplinary team that includes members across the life of the site.

After making space to understand structural oppression in our contextual settings at Eden, my next challenge was to engage local movement communities more directly. This involved multiple actions, such as increasing the range of possible contextual education sites and modifying assignments so that students actively engaged with local

grassroots groups by identifying them and discussing social justice topics relevant to the class with group members. For example, we had an assignment in the first-level cohort to visit a neighborhood and observe the economic divide established from one street to the next. After they had physically visited the site, students were asked to reflect on the forces acting upon the community to maintain this divide, most starkly seen in housing value differences. Distance learning students were charged to locate a similar dynamic of racialized structural oppression in housing in their community. Later assignments asked students to interview community leaders and understand the missions of their organizations in relationship to the forces acting upon the community. Inside the mentorship relationship, after surfacing contextualized structural oppression in their sites, students and supervisors were asked to create a response, implement the response, and reflect on its impact with the supervisor and the community.

Four values guided our social transformation project: the practices of reflection, risk, relationships, and rage. *Reflection* is the intentional space created through wonder, attentiveness, integration, experimentation. In year one, we ask students to recover their naivete and approach with a sense of wonder, and in year two we ask students to form deliberate practice. Seminars with core faculty and their cohort peers allow space to digest their ministry experiences and integrate them with current course learning. The seminar is a space to reflect in the community on our shared practice of ministry. Another site of reflection is with theological reflectors, and possibly with other team members at the site.

Risk asks supervisors, faculty, and peers to be agitational in confronting ministry behaviors and practices that may cause harm in ministry and to create space with supervision and peer support to try new ways of doing ministry, aiming for self-care, boundaries, effectiveness, and equity. Students form deliberate practices where they observe and tell the truth about the forces of injustice acting on and within their contextual education sites. Students are accompanied as they do this reflection through the assignments and curriculum to support their discovery and integration. Risk also asks students to create bold goals, and ministry plans that address some form of structural oppression in their setting beyond crisis-care social services. One senior project discovered and shared their site's direct participation in slavery and the family names of the enslaved who were used to build the church. The student project was to devise a reparation plan with the congregation to find descendants of the enslaved and engage in truth-telling and initiate a gesture of repair. None of us were prepared for the student to be asked to leave the site by a council member. The student was able to stay because the project and journey was fully coordinated with the supervisor and the leadership team of the church. The student's research and historical site study were later used in the educational programs of the site.

Relationships asks our students to take seriously the collaborative nature of ministry. Through the curriculum, they identify local partners, build relationships within

their ministry setting, and design plans of action with community members for their communities.

Rage asks our learning community to locate stories of oppression and anger as sources of energy for direct action and the interruption of oppressive forces. Our classes study the history of socially oppressed groups and the structures that have systematically oppressed them; then we ask students to imagine counteractive policies, practices, and activities in their ministry context that would resist these forces or provide leadership that intentionally works toward social justice.

Finally, practices of reflection, risk, relationships, and rage are critical for those of us who are seeking to be conveners of liberation and transformation. Contextual education, which is the place where all the seminary's curricula meet, can also be the place where the curricula are integrated and practiced in the public square. Students engage in supervision in a live community, not a theoretical context for theological imagination. Contextual education can strengthen and continue to close the gap between theory and practice to bring faith leaders to permanent commitments for sustained social justice action. By theology, we now mean the ongoing practice of social transformation in the pursuit of God and of God's mandate toward social justice, and these pursuits mean tangible liberation and transformation in the world!

By gathering the strands of braids in particular contexts, contextual education allows students to practice justice in the community and reflect on their future ministry practice. I believe that intentional exposure to anti-oppression behaviors, the history of social movements, and the tools of faith-based community organizing equips leaders to carry out the theological foundation and the mandate to live into social justice they receive in their classes. Since contextual education is required for most degree programs, it is an ideal place for spiritual formation *and* social transformation.

NOTES

[1] Nathan R. Todd, *Religious Participation and Social Justice: Individual and Congregation Effects* (PhD diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2010).

[2] Todd, *Religious Participation*, 43.

[3] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Orbis, 1994), 9–29.

[4] Barack Obama, Why Organize: Promise and Problems in the Inner City," *Illinois Issues* (August/September 1988): 35–40.

[5] Michelle Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice: Social Movements, Collective Imagination, and Political Hope* (Columbia University Press, 2022), 119.

[6] Emily Click, "The Evolution of Theological Field Education," in David O. Jenkins and P. Alice Rogers, eds., *Equipping the Saints: Best Practices in Contextual Theological Education* (Pilgrim Press, 2010), 16.

[7] Click, "The Evolution of Theological Field Education," 17.

[8] Click, "The Evolution of Theological Field Education," 18.

[9] Click, "The Evolution of Theological Field Education," 18.