Religious learning within the currents of global cultural flows suggests risky movements into *terra incognita*—be they unknown internal landscapes of the mind and heart in religious knowing, or external territories of culture, ideology, and the politics of identification. Drawing upon insights gained from three seminary-sponsored “travel study seminars” to Western and American Samoa, Malaysia and Vietnam, and India, this paper picks up on the challenge posed by “pedagogies of contextualization” (Foster et al. 2006). Using “context” as “method,” Foster’s pedagogies of contextualization as an evaluative framework, and James Loder’s “transformational logic” as a guiding hermeneutic for understanding human learning, the paper maps out certain epistemological dispositions and pedagogical practices that seem generative for the work of global/transnational religious knowing and learning.

* * *

Aeri Lee was on an eight-hour bus ride from Kampala to Kumi, Uganda, covered in “dust, grit, and sweat,” in a vehicle reeking of leftover vomit, with seats containing “dark stains of unknown origins” and a “floor littered with food-scrap and animal feathers and feces.” Next to her was an old woman with a hacking cough, who makes this trip frequently to secure cheaper goods for grandchildren orphaned by parents who died of AIDS and malaria. She detected what smelled like a combination of “rancid meat” and “ripe feet” coming from a brown plastic bag. The woman explained that it is smoked fermented young bamboo stalks mixed with groundnuts sauce, and offered her some. In a Faulkner-esque missive to friends back at home, this traveler wrote:

I could have remained nauseated by the unknown and misunderstood smell, and perhaps even a little judgmental and certainly distanced from my neighbor. *But a little information, a little imagination, a little effort, and a connection is made, and a chance for my inner transformation happens.* Maybe an important lesson is to be learned here in our cross-cultural mission/partnership.¹ (emphasis added)

¹ Aeri Lee is an adjunct instructor of music and worship at Pacific School of Religion, and worship director of Chinese Community United Methodist Church in Oakland, California. She travels to Uganda each summer to teach sa-
It seems as though after thirteen years of transnational commuting, Aeri has been able to capture with precision essential features of religious learning within global cultural ebb and flow. Through pensive letters sent to eager readers back home, Aeri reminds her supporters that she is not providing them a sensational travelogue of globe-trotting expeditions. Rather, she is inviting them—for just a fraction of time—to shift their ocular angle in order to see the world differently, so that, with invigorated eschatological hope, they may inhabit the world differently.

We theological educators seek such “teachable” opportunities assiduously. Religious learning—and religious leadership—is local, but we recognize that the “local” is not so “local” anymore given the whirling currents of global exchange. To answer the familiar epistemological question, “How do we know what we know?” we now often begin with, “It depends on who you are and where you stand….” We are acutely aware that teaching and learning involves political as well as mental mapping.

In their study of the professional formation of clergy, as reported in *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, Foster, Dahill, Golemon, and Tolentino describe the “signature pedagogical framework” of seminary/theological education (and religious learning, by extension) as being necessarily interpretive, formational, performative, and contextual. Their “pedagogy of contextualization” emphasizes three crisscrossing expressions: 1) critical consciousness of context, 2) capacity to interpret and engage context, and 3) and ability to effect transformative change in context. Following the authors’ “contextual pedagogies” as an overarching evaluative framework, this paper probes for insights that could help advance transna-

---

tional religious knowing and learning as mediated through what is often called “travel study seminars.” Typically reliant upon faculty connections and leadership, these travel seminars—sometimes called “immersion experiences”—take students to regions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, for a combination of visits to cultural, religious, and historic sites; interaction with local groups (e.g., theological institutions, religious communities, non-profit agencies) for study, conversation, meal-sharing, and worship; and “cross-cultural” exposures to “local colors.” Having been a faculty co-facilitator for three such travel seminars (to Western and American Samoa, to Malaysia and Vietnam, and to India), I continue to wonder what resources are available to the seminary for effective teaching of transnational inter-cultural and inter-religious engagement. I also wonder what learnings can be drawn for the reconfiguration of theological education in North America as a result of our transnational crossings, lest our students confuse themselves to be anthropologists studying the “cultural other,” or theological tourists entranced by the exotics, or self-congratulatory First-World citizens set out to “be in solidarity” with “the suffering Third World.”

Guides for “cross-cultural learning” and “intercultural interaction” abound. One practical guidebook offers extensive “critical incidents,” case studies, and simulation exercises for cognitive, behavioral, experiential, and “attribution” training for cross-cultural encounters.3 Perhaps implicit in such competency-based approach is the assumption that one could learn to engage the “other” rather methodically, scientifically. Know the “right” behaviors, know the “right” values, practice how to get acclimated to unfamiliar settings, and one mitigates the stress of “cultural shock,” achieve greater empathy, and develop mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships. Or do we…? In the words of John Dewey (and as good cross-cultural training guidebooks would

also teach), “mere activity does not constitute experience.” For all the limitations of empiricism, we are reminded that in experiential learning, there is the active dimension of activity (doing), and a complementary passive dimension of subjecting oneself to the experience (undergoing), which together make the experience of knowing the “other” a rather indeterminate process to “master.” In Dewey’s words:

To learn from experience is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying, an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connections of things.6

Thus, for more thoughtful engagement with context in our transnational crossings, we scrutinize the doing and undergoing dimensions of the learning process, in order to propel our teaching beyond the skill-based prisms of “cultural competency,” beyond the mental gymnastics of “dialogue,” beyond the sensationalism of “theological voyeurism,” and beyond the paralysis of fear or self-criticism. Using “context” as “method,” Foster’s pedagogies of contextualization as an evaluative framework, and James Loder’s “transformational logic” as a guiding hermeneutic for understanding human learning, I aim to map some coordinates for how travel study seminars contribute to certain epistemological, hermeneutical, and spiritual “(re)positioning” that cultivate critical consciousness of context, robust interpretation and engagement with context, and effectual work towards faithful change of self and context.


5 See, for instance, James Loder’s sharp critique of scientism’s dismissal of “imagination” in human learning, which Loder sees in Dewey’s privileging of experiential knowing, in The Transforming Moment, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989). Ironically, the gnostic disposition found in Loder’s transformational logic does not seem far different from the investment in the experiential moment expressed in the above quotation from Dewey.


7 Cartography is a political act. Utilizing the mapping metaphor, I reveal how what I see is configured by where and how I am positioned (the “critical” act of analysis).
Deep in the Flow: Critical Consciousness of Context

Surveying pedagogies of contextualization, Foster et al. delineated three distinct varieties, the first being a concerted effort to raise students’ critical consciousness of context by expanding their horizons of perception. Typically, students who sign up for travel study seminars eagerly anticipate being transported physically to another locale on the globe. It is surprising how many North American seminarians have not traveled outside of the U.S.; thus, they take advantage of travel seminars to “see the world.” What they typically expect to do is to “see new things,” but what they often undergo is a re-orientation of how they see. This occurs through multimodal experiences of “the ordinary and everyday,” in which “contrast” becomes a hermeneutical tool for disorientation and reorientation, and self-reflexivity becomes an essential spiritual sensibility for the traveling learner.

Theories of everyday life\(^8\) call our attention to the intensity of knowledge mapping in the ordinary, which is why much learning takes place just by absorbing the everyday life of another context. Hail a rickshaw, haggle at the open market, eat at the hawker’s food stalls, sip that kava juice, try that “stinky” durian, handle food properly with your hands—these are rather ordinary (even silly) tasks, and yet to do them, we are making moment-by-moment transactions of meaning with unfamiliar rules of sight/site, citation/speech, taste, and touch. The ebb and flow of Bakhtin’s bytovoijn—“the ordinary and everyday”—provide powerful “contrasts” which require constant hermeneutic transpositions and negotiations.

Personal safety well-observed, the ability to “let go” and “go with the flow” is honed in such experiences. Disconcertingly, one’s “conceptual horizon” (krugozor) sharpens while remaining fuzzy. On the one hand, multimodal experiences awaken the senses, such as when acts

---

of worship in temple settings bring bodies closer to the ground than toward the heavens. On the other hand, when the “other” looks strangely familiar, when the impossibility of seeing behind one’s ears becomes obvious, when “sniper spices” render taste buds numb, one undergoes intense questioning of (self-)identity and (self-)identification. Suddenly, one’s own context (“home”) becomes strangely unfamiliar—herein lays the ethnographic principle for “participant-observation” in context: making the familiar strange, and making strange the familiar.

Self-reflexivity about one’s social location becomes a necessary spiritual practice. In the syllabus for the seminar to Malaysia and Vietnam, a learning goal reads:

Engage in self-critical reflection, connecting the personal to social, one’s own social location with the cultural-religious contexts of others; and articulate how this immersion contributes to one’s formation as a religious leader in one’s future context(s).

Just as changing one’s mind often necessitates a re-orientation of world-concepts and self-concepts, what enables critical awareness of context is a heightened awareness of one’s own positioning on the globe—literally and figuratively.

The expectant sense of (self-)disorientation could be described in terms of James Loder’s “convictional experience”: it is something that “discloses reality and calls for new interpretations.” In this “crisis” of perception, “incompatible frames of reference” struggle to converge, and “discontinuity” of meaning nags at the learner. But if we were to follow Loder’s logic of human learning, and if something could be gleaned from the “pedagogy of contrast,” then it is this irreducibility of difference, this enduring ambiguity and discontinuity, which compel the

---

11 Ibid., 38, 40-41.
learner to “scan” for new insights. It is what triggers “imaginative leaps.” This takes us to Foster’s second pedagogy of contextualization.

**Navigating the Flow: Contextual Encounter**

In Loder’s paradigm, human learning spirals from a crisis of convictional experience to an interlude of scanning for new meanings, to constructive acts of imagination, to release of new insight, to attempts at verification and comprehension within communities of accountability. The phase of constructive imagination correlates readily with the “pedagogy of contextual encounter,” which, for Foster et al., entails the “capacity for empathic consciousness,” “mutual understanding,” and “dialogical reciprocity.” In terms of learning experiences which transport students through borders both porous and fixed, we ask, how is the *habitus* of a First-World traveler (re)configured when confronting the juxtapositions of straw huts and internet cafes, shantytowns and premium condominiums, world-class high-rises and towering temple spires? When Disneyland’s “It’s A Small World” proves inadequate as a concept of the global community, what helps to prevent tendencies toward romanticization of “shiny squirrels,” withdrawal due to fear, or paralysis in engagement due to hyper-sensitivity? *Making sense of what one sees* becomes an important task following learning *how to see*. For that work, travel study seminars make evident the importance of several important epistemological and hermeneutic dispositions: *heteroglossia* (the differentiation of meaning in each utterance), “flexible citizenship,” “mnemonic communities,” and active imagination, which allows visions of possible futures while maintaining serenity with the void of *not knowing*.

---

12 Ibid., 24-25, 29.  
13 Loder, 40.  
14 Foster et al., *Educating Clergy*, 144-145.
The stark realization that English is not the lingua franca of the world—or, equally poignant, that English is spoken fluently in many parts of the world—invites examination of the politics of communication in encountering contexts. Just as the miracle of Pentecost is as much about the ability to hear as it is about the ability to speak, participants of travel study seminars undergo awareness of the “social, historical, meteorological, and physiological” conditions which make every utterance, every act of communication unique and particular to the situation. The inadequacy of monolinguality makes one realize that it is not just about learning new languages, but also about learning new worldviews, new value assumptions, new ways of mapping the world and loci of power. As one host in India put it, “Americans should travel to learn how the world sees the world.” Or, in the words of cultural theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen, “…the purpose of a renewed understanding of the world is to perceive ourselves differently in relation to our new vision of the world.” Traveling expands learners’ geographical and geopolitical imaginary, as “diverse frames of reference cross our horizon, multiply our perspectives, and enrich our subjectivity.” Citizens of a First-World nation are challenged to re-examine the politics of their “flexible” citizenship—beginning with the simple awareness of what the American passport affords in terms of privilege, to more complex understandings of transnational flows of human beings via the whirlwinds of corporate globalization.

The overwhelming complexity of contextual encounters makes learners grateful for traveling companionship. With adequate attention to interpersonal dynamics, to hospitality, to accountability, to mutual support and critique, travelers can congeal as a “mnemonic community.”

---

17 Ibid., 255.
for one another—a community of thought that assists individuals acts of seeing, interpreting, responding, and remembering for future action. These activities insinuate the centrality of constructive imagination, which is at the center of Loder’s transformative learning logic. A helpfully succinct definition of the imaginative act is provided by pastoral theologian David Hogue:

> Imagination is the distinctively human capacity to envision multiple alternative realities, scenarios, and outcomes…. Imagination frees us from the tyranny of the present, of the logical, of the “real.” It also frees us from the constraints of the now, as it pictures what events were like in the historic past or what they might become in the future.

Traveling provides treasure troves of stories and rituals that trigger “imaginative leaps” (what contemporary poet Robert Bly calls “associative leaps”) which, driven by intuitive force, make possible new insight and meaning that existing theories and concepts cannot explain.

That said, in every aspect of knowing and learning, there is an unshakable indeterminacy of mystery, of not knowing which seems to be part and parcel of human understanding. If fear of the “other” leads to withdrawal or paralysis, the flip side of that might be the hubris of aspiring to fully know the “other,” the consequence of which may be cooptation of experience or cooptation of context. “I don’t know” or “I cannot possibly know” may very well be a courageous epistemological confession—so long as it is sustained by a fiery determination to continue “scanning” for new insight.

**Going Against the Flow: Contextual Transformation**

The third contextual pedagogy involves effecting transformative change in context. Interestingly, Foster et al. observed very few teaching practices that “explicitly…focused on the sys-
temic and social transformation of institutions or systems.”

As many seminarians learn when engaging international hosts, what is demanded of them is not “charity,” but rather justice-seeking action, beginning at home. A case study in Pedagogies for the Non-Poor presenting the merits of “immersion programs” to the “Third World” underscores the need for developing pedagogies for social change. Participants in such programs must “promise” to “interpret as faithfully as [they] could [their] learnings from the experience for no less than one year among [their] own constituencies…. “

Corresponding to Loder’s transformational logic, these pedagogies emphasize sustained verification and correspondence/comprehension within communities of accountabilities. It simply is not good enough that seminarians return home, show photos, give sermons about how life-changing the experience was, and resume to their usual habitus with Starbucks runs in the same manner they sought after McDonald’s or KFC in Chennai or Singapore. The circumambulation of deities in the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai may shift a learner’s spiritual grounding, and the circumnavigation of Pago Pago, Samoa, may invite critical analysis of the fragility of the earth’s biodiversity, but what does it take to cultivate a transgressive spirit that strategizes and organizes communities for sustained action through transnational partnerships? Given the volatility of the global public square, how might we avoid the hubris of First-World “benevolence,” while fostering in First-World citizens the courage to confront the “institutional cultures” and “systemic structures” of their religious communities? Being “in the flow”

---

21 Foster et al., Educating Clergy, 151. Emphasis in text.
23 Ibid., 171.
24 Ibid., 166.
25 Foster et al., Educating Clergy, 152.
of global learning often requires the ironic capacity to “go against the flow,” and yet this seems to be an arena least developed in our pedagogical practices.  

Within education circles, it seems that the familiar tenets of participatory action research (PAR) can facilitate concrete “imaginative leaps” for learners from seeing “what is” to actualizing “what could be.” Researcher Alice McIntyre describes PAR succinctly, drawing on Freirean and feminist critical pedagogies:

[it is] an approach characterized by the active participation of researchers and participants in the coconstruction of knowledge; the promotion of self- and critical awareness that leads to individual, collective, and/or social change; and an emphasis on a colearning process where researchers and participants plan, implement, and establish a process for disseminating information gathered in the research project.  

Imagine a travel study seminar that does not end with a self-congratulatory celebration at the end of the ten-day trip, in which the confession “I’m still processing…” absolves learners from any further implication with the contexts or people they have met. Instead, the “study” continues with the collaborative planning and implementation of a process that exacts some concrete, on-going commitment and responsibility on the part of the border-crosser. The “colearning” and “coconstructing” tenets disallow any one party from determining singlehandedly what the agenda for action would be. The “communities of accountability” now expand from beyond the group of travelers and their home communities, to include places and peoples encountered along the way.

Incidentally, the fact that there remains few developed pedagogical practices for sustained engagement in systemic change—especially in transnational partnerships for religious learning and theological education—presents vexing implications for theological institutions in the U.S. More often than we care to admit, institutional hosts overseas confront us with the question: “What happens when you return home?” Numerous questions demand continued wrestling: How are travel study seminars an integral part of the curricula in theological schools? How is “context” as “method” an educational approach for the entire curriculum, not just for the “special electives”? How do theological disciplines and discourses get re-mapped in the same way we expect world-concepts and self-concepts get re-mapped for students? More programmatically, what are the fiscal and staffing constraints for sustaining transnational learning opportunities? Turning “constraints” into possibilities which reflect institutional priorities, how will international “partnerships” be forged beyond one-time exchanges? What are the risks, and what would enable “imaginative leaps”?

Learning on the go is risky business, especially when traversing unfamiliar territories (of the mind as well as the globe). Perhaps the two spiritual sensibilities shared by Fr. Felix Wilfred of Madras University suffice as a grounding force for traveling seminarians: *respect for the sacredness of all life*, and the importance of *friendship*. The former holds in tension that which is mysterious and beyond our comprehension, thus compelling us toward continuous “scanning.” The latter forge a bond of solidarity, responsibility, and trust through laughter, which make such experiences as the sharing of smoked fermented young bamboo stalks a transformative moment.

REFERENCES


---

28 “Hic sunt dracones” is a designation on the old Lenox Globe for territories unknown.