


# Considering Reflection From the Student Perspective in Higher Education

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## Abstract

This article reports the findings of a project to reexamine reflection from the student perspective that took place after a major curriculum revision. The project used a hermeneutically inspired action research method that involved interviewing 17 undergraduate theology students after a two-semester practicum to ascertain the ways in which students understand and use reflection in practice and as a means of establishing identity. The data revealed key themes that surround students' understanding of reflection: (a) Students think and write about reflection in detached ways, (b) there is a connection between reflection and self-understanding and self-definition, and (c) crisis plays a role in reflection. The article concludes with further discussions of these themes and with recommendations for pedagogical practice.

## Keywords

reflection, reflective practice, teaching and learning, higher education, religious education

## Introduction

Reflection has become a catchword in the academic and professional literature, and because of this reflection, assignments are now often given to pre-service students in professional degree programs as a means to assess and improve their performance. This has become such a common practice that it has created difficulty for students preparing for certain professions such as religious leadership because it assumes that they know how to reflect. For this reason, some educators are beginning to question to what degree reflection actually helps students understand professional practice (Jordi, 2011). More specifically, in a pre-service context, some theological educators are beginning to doubt that students can actually develop the skills of reflection that will help them make sense of their pre-service pastoral experiences and the practices that would sustain them as they transition into pastoral leadership (Schaller, 1994). In fact, Schön (1983) points out that one's ability to use "knowledge-in-action" depends on considerable experience in the profession as well as on one's ability to interpret situations by effectively recalling applicable knowledge—an ability that comes from experience. Schön recognizes the problem of reflection for those learning a profession. Reflection-in-action depends on one's ability to recognize and interpret a problem of practice. However, one can recognize problems of practice only after having practiced for some time. Even then, it is often difficult for professionals to know what to do and to feel certain that what they choose is the right thing to do.

I should define at the outset what I mean by reflection. The term has been defined in many different ways (Boud & Walker, 1998; Moon, 2006), but I will use Ryan's (2013, p. 145) twofold definition: (a) making sense of experience in relation to self, others, and contextual conditions; and (b) reimagining and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit.

For students, a theoretical understanding of reflection does not easily translate into practice (Russell, 2005). In spite of this difficulty, the literature points to ways for teachers to teach reflection in the classroom from a technical-rational epistemology (Edwards & Thomas, 2010; Schön, 1983; E. Smith, 2011). However, little is said about the outcome of reflection from the perspective of learning. We should therefore ask what reflection does for students, how students actually understand reflection in a classroom setting, and how this understanding results in deeper self-knowledge and better learning. Because reflection is an unclear term, students might become frustrated when the teacher cannot articulate exactly what it means from a teaching and learning perspective. In my own experience, I have found that even when I attempt to provide rules or guidelines for undergraduate theology students based on observed

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experiences, it never quite works for them. For example, my students do not do well in assignments that ask them to journal about their practicums. Several students have a native ability to write reflectively, but most, in spite of my best attempts to articulate my expectations, still write a step-by-step explanation of what they did. I have tried many times to refine my instructions by creating writing examples and templates, but nothing seems to enable those who are less adept at journaling to write at a deeper level. Perhaps they fail because reflection is a demanding cognitive activity that is difficult to master (Rodgers, 2002), as it requires one to “de-centre” (Bolam, Gleeson, & Murphy, 2003) and to step back from one’s own practice and “[visualize] oneself over time and place” (Stronach, Garratt, Pearce, & Piper, 2007, p. 180). “This could potentially detract students from their learning of technical skills or subject knowledge, which is likely to be a priority for students entering practice disciplines” (E. Smith, 2011, p. 215).

As I work closely with undergraduate theology students, I often ask myself the following questions:

**Research Question 1:** How meaningful is the notion of reflection in students’ professional programs and in the curriculum? If reflection is meaningful, how is it actually understood by undergraduate theology students?

**Research Question 2:** To what degree is reflection understood in the development of professional and personal identity?

I would like to find answers to these questions because in the year after their pre-service training my students will be required to do a 5-month full-time internship with a pastoral mentor in the field. If they were able to reflect on practice at the pre-service stage of their pastoral formation they would likely experience greater growth as practitioners and in their identity as professionals. The ability to reflect in transformative ways about pastoral practice not only sustains learning but also facilitates change. As Ryan (2013) puts it, “In treating ‘self’ as a subject of critical study in relation to others and the contextual conditions of study or work, ‘lifelong learning’ can be fostered” (p. 145). Being able to make sense of experiences in relation to self provides a crucial link between the reflective process and identity formation (Wong, 2009). In this article, I will speak to the difficult relationship between reflection and the development of the student self by reporting the findings of an action research project that I undertook. The project used the two research questions above as a guide.

## A Brief Review of the Literature in Higher Education

The literature on reflection in the context of the professional disciplines has focused on the methods of reflection and on how reflection can be taught and assessed to inform teaching

and learning (Clarkeburn & Kettula, 2012; Kember, McKay, Sinclair, & Wong, 2008), but it does not thoroughly address the issue of identity formation in the process of professional learning and engagement. That the application of reflection is a vital aspect of undergraduate course evaluation and skill development is noted across a number of academic disciplines, especially in professional programs. In teacher education, reflective journals have been used in pre-service teaching programs as a way to develop the reflective skills that help students make connections between theoretical knowledge and teaching practices (Chitpin, 2006). In business education, reflective journals help to integrate classroom teaching, theoretical knowledge, classroom discussion, and students’ personal experiences. The journaling process is considered an effective way for students to develop reflective skills, to take responsibility for their practice, to interact with others, and to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Kember et al., 2008; Pavlovich, 2007; Stewart, Keegan, & Stevens, 2008). Teachers use writing as a means of teaching reflection, and the assessment of the journal is usually linked to a learning outcome. Students who journal merely because they know they are going to be assessed on their reflections are unlikely to become proficient as reflective practitioners. The nursing education literature highlights reflection and reflective practice as ways to overcome the differences between nursing theory taught in the curriculum and nursing practices in the field, illustrating that nursing students need to develop reflective skills to increase the quality of patient care (Nicholl & Higgins, 2004). Nursing programs have also successfully used learning portfolios to help nursing students develop critical thinking skills that assist in personal and professional growth (McMullan, 2006). Portfolios have also been used in other academic disciplines such as teacher education (Klenowski & Carnell, 2006) and theological education (Wong et al., 2009).

A number of studies in social work have investigated the transferability of the reflective process into the professional context and its sustainability in that context. The findings from these studies suggest that students who learn reflective skills in their undergraduate studies and continue to hone those skills after graduation have more success with professional growth and competencies than those who do not (Murphy, Halton, & Dempsey, 2008; Ruch, 2002). This scaffolding effect from the classroom to the workplace also appears in health education, where it has been shown to help students/health professionals to deepen their critical thinking skills (Cronin & Connolly, 2007).

As this review demonstrates, the literature offers a number of insights into the challenges and importance of reflection from a teaching and learning perspective, but it does not explicitly describe the development of student identity. However, the broader literature on reflection in higher education has also begun to address the relationship between reflection and identity formation. Reflection is a means for students to examine their own view of self with respect to

what they believe and who they believe themselves to be (Ryan & Ryan, 2013; Wilson, 2002). From the perspective of social critical theory, reflection permits an examination of individual positionality within the broader context of a social system. This examination may lead students to an understanding of “how we align ourselves with particular identities (mother, father, doctor, nurse, patient, etc.) or how these identities encourage us to act in certain ways” (E. Smith, 2011, p. 213).

As I mentioned above, both the teacher education literature and the business education literature advocate reflective journaling as a means of connecting theory and practice, but they do not mention it as a vehicle for identity formation. Barney and Mackinlay (2010) contend that reflective journaling helped their Indigenous Australian Studies students consider the relationship of self to issues of power, race, and identity. As they put it, “Reflective writing holds possibilities for opening up an engaged, dialogic, reflective and critical classroom to help students think about difficult issues, the traumatic history of colonialism, their identities and positioning” (p. 164). Carrington and Selva (2010) argue that a more structured approach, one that includes scaffolding to facilitate reflection, will lead to deeper and more critical reflection on diversity and identity. Ryan and Ryan (2013) offer a four-stage model that they call the 4Rs of reflection:

1. Reporting and Responding: Report what happened or what the issue or incident involved.
2. Relating: Relate or make a connection between the incident or issue and your own skills, professional experience, or discipline knowledge.
3. Reasoning: Highlight in detail significant factors underlying the incident or issue.
4. Reconstructing: Reframe or reconstruct future practice or professional understanding. (p. 254)

This model of reflective thinking (and writing) is concerned not only with the relationship between theory and practice but also with personal and professional identity. According to Moon (2006), reflective writing improves student learning by slowing down the pace of learning, increasing the sense of ownership in learning, acknowledging the role of emotion in learning, and providing a learning experience that deals with situations that are not straightforward. The literature has also elaborated on the relationship between reflection and personal epistemologies as it relates to professional practice and workplace learning. This literature is relevant for contextual reasons: Many professional programs have practicums and internships requirements. Billett (2002) has examined how working and learning identities are co-constructed through the workplace environment and co-participatory practices. The workplace helps form:

[i]ndividuals’ identity and subjectivities [by shaping] the agentic action and intentionality that constitutes the self. The degree to which individuals engage with what they encounter and what learning arises is, in part, person dependent, because of the uniqueness of each individual’s cognitive experience . . . so individuals’ construction of self is person dependent, as individual ontogenies and ontogenetic development are unique because their prior experience is not and cannot be the same as others in that it is negotiated individually through a lifetime of interactions with the social world. (Billett & Somerville, 2004, p. 315)

By way of “backward design” that starts in the workplace, the relationship between reflection and identity formation may be plotted in courses and throughout the entire curriculum. Therefore, it is important to understand how students understand reflection and its contribution to identity.

As this review demonstrates, the literature in higher education offers significant insights into the challenges and importance of reflection from a teaching and learning perspective and significant descriptions of the development of student identity. This broader literature in higher education facilitates the refinement of undergraduate theological education by filling in the gap between reflection and student identity.

## Project Context

Over the years, my colleagues and I have worked with many undergraduate theology students who seem to conceive of reflection in a disconnected way. Students see it as a nice theory or a technique to better understand practice rather than as a way to participate more meaningfully in their practicums. Concerned by this skewed perception, my colleagues and I began to plan an approach to the curriculum that would be more intentionally reflective in nature, and we organized a collaborative action research project to revise the curriculum. In essence, we believed that if we knew how students understood reflection, we could revise the curriculum accordingly, mapping out where pedagogical decisions need to be made to help students improve their ability to reflect and develop a stable and coherent understanding of reflection. We hoped that our efforts would lead to more thoughtful practice and a better transition into pastoral leadership. My role in this project was to understand and interpret how undergraduate theology students comprehend the notion of reflection. I accomplished this by conducting interviews with students who were enrolled in a field education course that included classroom instruction and practicum concurrently and that ran from September to April.

The two research questions that I mentioned earlier are not new questions. However, the questions and the problems they draw attention to became more significant to me as my institution’s curriculum changed to incorporate a more reflective approach to theological education at the undergraduate level.

Most revealing to me about the students' narratives were their questions and struggles about identity concerning their self-understanding as pastoral practitioners.

## Project Methodology, Method, Design, and Participants

Methodology here refers to the philosophical and epistemological assumptions inherent in the two research questions and the way in which the data is collected and analyzed. By method I simply mean the way I answer the research questions. This article combines hermeneutical and action research methodologies that use a semistructured interview method. A hermeneutically inspired action research methodology is helpful because it acknowledges the difficulty of practice and starts to question the language that we (students and researcher) use to substantiate our actions. This acknowledging and questioning lead to conversation and dialogue about students' actual experiences. I used action research as a way to collect the data and hermeneutics as a means of interpreting the data from the student interviews. The data were collected from interviews of students that took place in the first cycle of the action research process.

This project used an insider action research approach. That is, I explicitly researched my own institution's curricular practices while retaining a normal functional role as a teacher. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) observe that insider action research in the context of an institution such as a university falls into one of four categories:

1. Traditional research approaches.
2. Classical action research.
3. Individuals engaged in reflection on professional practice.
4. Large-scale transformational change.

This project is a classical action research study in which I am studying not my own pedagogical practices but how reflection is taught in the curriculum as well as how students learn to do reflection as a result of that teaching. In classical action research, according to Coghlan and Brannick (2010) research is framed in terms of "managing change or solving a problem; it is directed at confronting and resolving a pre-identified issue" (p. 105). To manage change or solve a problem, action research must be a social process, which necessitates collaboration. Collaboration is achieved through conversation, and conversation indicates the need to build collaboration around understanding while also recognizing the inherent difficulty of doing (Smits, 1997). In our case, the students benefitted, in their final year of study, from the improved pedagogy that resulted from our conversations with them.

I used Gadamer's (1989) concepts to inform my interpretation of the data collected from the student interviews. For

Gadamer, understanding is like a conversation in which prejudice or bias is part of the process and must be used in a positive way. Gadamer says that prejudice should not dominate understanding but should be used for contrasting purposes, because "this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' about the object nor the extinction of oneself, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices" (p. 238). As a result, the hermeneutic process is targeted toward understanding any kind of human action. Gadamer goes on to explain it this way,

in dialogue, spoken language—in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other's point—performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to the written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics. (pp. 361-362)

This means that (a) interpretation is always rooted in particular linguistic and cultural traditions, (b) interpretation is an investigative process, and (c) this investigation proceeds via question and answer, via the iterative testing of understanding. Thus, in my conversations with students and my interpretation of the manuscripts, I bring all my biases and prejudices and use them in a productive fashion to comprehend more deeply how students understand reflection. Speaking practically, I accomplish this through an interview process using a question-and-answer format.

A total of 17 students—nine males and eight females—from all undergraduate theology degree programs participated in the interviews. The semistructured interviews took place midway through the winter semester (January-April). The list and recruitment of students was done by the teachers teaching the field education courses and was based on a purposive sample (see Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). That is, the teachers selected the students based on an informed understanding of those who were likely to be thoughtful, informative, and articulate about their own student experiences.

Each semistructure interview took about one and a half hours to conduct. I met the students on campus. At the beginning of the interview, a consent form was distributed and signed by all students stating the purpose of the study and how the data was to be used for institutional and research purposes. Furthermore, the consent form indicated that the research project received approval from the university's Research Ethics Board. The interviews were audio recorded with the written and verbal consent of the students. The interviews were conducted as conversations, which not only seemed a more natural forum for discussion but also helped me access the students' experiences. The interview guide contained roughly 10 questions. In conjunction with the questions, I used probes to encourage the students to share further details, introspections, and experiences (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

I used the qualitative data analysis software program ATLAS.ti to help me immerse myself in the raw data and to



aid me with coding. In the first phase of immersion, I listened to the audio recording of the interviews and then took notes. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim and subsequently read and re-read these transcripts. I was endeavoring at this stage to get a sense of the interviews in their particularity and the ways in which they might advance the study as a whole. This task required me to reflect on the interviews in their entirety before breaking them down into smaller units.

Once I had acquired a good feel for the interviews, I began the coding phase. During this repetitive procedure, I evaluated data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, or segments of the interviews, and then categorized this data into units of meaning. I began coding the interviews by rereading the transcripts and then listening to the audio recordings again. As a result, I modified some of the codes to refine them, which then helped me to generate a number of categories. Here are some sample categories from the interview data:

- Self-understanding and identity as ministers
- Dissatisfaction with reflection on practice
- Discontent with reflection in understanding self
- Belief that the way that reflection is taught in class is not transformative
- Content of reflection
- Reflection is technical/mechanical
- Reflection and engagement with the context
- Reflection and learning
- Pedagogy and reflection
- Reflection and practicum.

I then eliminated categories that contained only one or two examples or that overlapped considerably with other categories. However, Norton (2009) warns that “even if one person has said something that can be described as a category, it might be more true to the research analysis to keep it in; this is part of the subjective process and will need justifying” (p. 120). If I was to heed this warning, I needed to find another way to refine these categories/concepts. For this purpose, I relied on the strategies that Bazeley (2013) suggests:

- Note where this concept sits within your coding system and/or current analysis framework. This will help to put it into context and to see what its role might be in your analysis.
- Read through texted code for the concept you are considering. Make a summary by listing the points you observe as you read.
- Define the boundaries of the code and the concept it represents—what it includes, what it does not include.
- Consider how widely this concept was raised in the data, for how many cases it was relevant, and who or which these cases were. Identify also where it was absent, or was discussed in negative terms. Do those who discussed it differ from those who did not in any obvious way? (p. 230)

I found the ATLAS.ti program particularly useful for categorizing. It not only assisted me by handling the categories/concepts involved but also allowed me to visually connect these categories/concepts in the form of networks and then to develop and link themes.

Although I did not use a second coder, I did rely on three “reflective friends” among my faculty colleagues in the research project to help me with the coding and analysis of the student interviews. The conversations with these colleagues helped me to articulate my thinking process and to clarify emerging ideas and themes that provided new insights into the student interview data.

## Research Project Findings

Bazeley (2013) defines a theme as a way to “describe an integrating, relational statement derived from the data that identifies both content and meaning” (p. 190). Saldaña (2013) states that “a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection” (p. 14). A number of themes emerged from the interviews.

First, students have a tendency to think and write about reflection on their practicum experiences in detached ways. That is to say, students see reflection as an abstract concept that is difficult to initially practice, and when it is practiced it is in a mechanistic way that might lead to understanding. Many of the teachers require their students to use journals to help them reflect, but students tend to resist being assigned reflective journals and assessed based on their contents. Here is what a participant named Ken thought about reflective journals as a course requirement:

It's really difficult because it is work that you need to do but it's also a very personal thing you should be doing regardless of if you are in the class or not. But I guess for myself, when I am being forced to do it, it just kind of makes me just not want to do it.

Many of the students feel the same way. Instead of seeing reflection as a way to interact with the practicum and as the context for learning, they see it as a method forced upon them. Those students who wanted to take reflection seriously and incorporate it into their practicum experiences found that critical reflection caused trouble because it separated them even more from the context of their practicum and life. John described it like this,

I want to . . . reflect, but reflection is difficult. . . . I've got to be honest: I don't really put much in my journal. It doesn't really help so far in the practicum because I have to think about my actions. I'm not sure how to do that well.

The interviews indicate that students think that the act of compulsory reflecting does not help them to understand their sense of self or subjectivity.

Second, students face a number of issues in connecting their reflections from their practicum experiences to their

own self-understanding. Not only do students write reflections in detached ways but also their reflections have no real basis either in the practicum, in the classroom, or in helping them to develop their sense of self. Students see reflection as an unconstructive activity that does not help them to figure out what it means to be a pastoral leader. Students express dissatisfaction when their classroom learning does not help them in their practicum practice. For example, Eli told me this in the interview:

I wish instructors in general would be able to explain to us students things that we're going to face in ministry and things we're . . . really going to be challenged on and that we're really going to be worked on . . . and just to be really authentic and real with us and say, "this is a huge part of ministry that you really need to know."

The curriculum is asking students to be reflective, and yet it seems that the curriculum and the instruction have lost touch with the lived world, which leaves students like Eli feeling frustrated. The curriculum—especially the field education course—is not preparing students well for pastoral practice.

Third, students have difficulty identifying and defining a sense of self as it relates to their practicum. From a narrative perspective, students live in a storied world. Stories are a way to articulate identity (Kerby, 1991), and using stories to articulate identity presupposes an experiential, pre-reflective self-awareness<sup>1</sup> (Drummond, 2004; Zahavi, 2005). The reflective comprehension of life, that knowledge of the self that is made current in the act of reflection, originates from a prior awareness of self. This identity articulation of the narrative self can be connected to what Ricoeur (1984) calls the "pre-narrative structure," which provides students with the possibility of developing the self as pastoral leader. What the interviews indicate is that students do not continue to develop their pre-narrative stories as part of their own constructions of self but instead give priority to the immediate concerns of their practicums, such as developing pastoral identities. And yet at the same time, many of the students from the interviews voiced a need to tell their own stories. These stories are often about self-identity and understanding. For instance, Shelly stated,

The only issue for me is that some of the things that are taught in class and the practicum won't apply to me because I'm not in a traditional church setting. I just feel like there is not really a place for people like me sometimes . . . there is not really anything for people like me.

In the context of her difficulties in the practicum, Shelly is attempting to create a story of future direction and is doing so from her own experiences—developing an understanding of herself as a future ministering person of some sort.

The final theme centers on reflection during crisis as a way for students to understand self and identity. Students do not experience crisis in the life-threatening sense, but

at particular points in the practicum, they do need to make decisions that cause angst. As Kerby (1991) insightfully observes, "questions of identity and self-understanding arise primarily in crisis situations and at certain turning points in our routine behavior" (pp. 6-7). Nathaniel, who is doing his practicum with youth, spoke about the difficulty he has with the issue of pastoral intimacy, "You don't want to get too close to put yourself into a situation where it is going to be your word against the kids." Nathaniel believes that for youth transformation happens in the context of relationships, but he found it challenging to facilitate relationships in his practice.

For undergraduate practicum students, the experience of crisis is often expressed as a way to comprehend the relationship between their ideals and reality and to understand their selves to respond to the situations that they find themselves in. Marnie shared this experience she had with congregational singing,

There are a lot of elderly people in our congregation. . . . Something prompted me to say something to the loud drummer. I said it nicely but during the rehearsal: "I really appreciate your drumming but maybe you could tone it down a bit, just not so loud." He kind of got offended when I said that.

Like Nathaniel, Marnie found herself wanting to hold to a strong sense of principle or conviction, but found it challenging to achieve it in her practice.

## Discussion and Recommendations

This project describes how undergraduate practicum students ascribe meaning to and comprehend the notion of reflection. Much of my conversation with students focused on the development of professional and personal identity. In this section of the article, I wish to deepen the discussion of the themes identified in the previous section and to offer a number of suggestions for pedagogical practice in a classroom context.

Students have come to see reflection as technical and detached from the essence or substance of their own subjectivity. In theological education, there is a supposition that knowledge about pastoral leadership is mediated by the reflective act that creates reliable practices. However, this particular understanding of subjectivity and knowledge-generation can be questioned (Schön, 1983). Taylor (1989) states that in much of Western culture, each individual person needs to find his or her own way in the world, and "the development of certain modern character forms, of a highly independent individualism, has brought along with it, understandably if mistakenly, certain views of selfhood and language which have denied it or lost it utterly from sight" (p. 38). Taylor argues that the creation of self is made possible not through "technical-rationality" but through involvement within the "webs of interlocution"—that is to say, by

always talking, always arguing, always probing and challenging, even interrogating each other to create identity. In another work, Taylor (1991) shares this insight, “No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us—what George Herbert Mead called ‘significant other’” (p. 33). In respect to theological education, requiring practicum students to journal their own experiences bolsters the view of a highly individualized self—reflection on the self by a self.

According to the opinions that students voiced in the interviews, journaling needs to be more effectively explained in terms of purpose, goal, and evaluation. Teachers need to realize that journaling can not only capture some of what is happening in students’ minds but also engage students and enable them to collaborate with others to help them form their own stories about identity and move out of their own subjectivity (Ryan, 2011). This is possible especially in a classroom (Goldsmith, 1996). As Frie (2011) points out, “the experience and articulation of identity always takes place within particular sociocultural frameworks that give meaning to our lives. As participants within specific frameworks of understanding, we have the ability to self-identity and potentially shape or alter our identities” (p. 59).

In the interviews, the language that students used to describe what it means to be a pastoral leader was very much tied to their own ideals and histories. I mentioned earlier that ministry students tend to prioritize the immediate concerns of their practicums over the development of their pre-narrative stories. However, many of the students from the interviews did voice their need to tell their own stories. Most students in the interviews could not present coherent stories of their selves, and this created difficulty in their practicums. Practicum students who will eventually enter the profession and face the many challenges of pastoral leadership must begin to understand the self by constructing an identity narrative. Postmodern thought provides a helpful framework for understanding and constructing the self because it emphasizes the constant and continuous production of identity within certain historical and discursive contexts. Taking cues from Foucault and Derrida, Elliott (2005) states,

the self is deconstructed in that linguistic sources of the self are emphasized and identity therefore becomes much more fluid and determined by context. This leads to an interesting turn to the analysis of language, literature, and discourse as central to understanding social life. (p. 124)

Ricoeur (1992) interprets identity as “exactly the same” or “identical” and believes that it is permanent through time without sameness through time. Thus, narrative provides the means of thinking about identity as something that is reasonably secure over time but that still incorporates progress and development. In other words, constructing identity is managing the process of change and continuity (J. Smith, 1994). If

practicum students are not able to create narratives, the consequences in existential terms are not promising, for according to Lynch (1997),

for us to continually experiencing, in the present moment, a range of thoughts and feelings, or for us to be engaging in a range of actions, with no sense of what had preceded these thoughts, feelings and actions, would be a bewildering existence devoid of any clear meaning. (p. 355)

If practicum students are to construct personal identities, they must be able to form narratives that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. By so doing, they will be able to structure and categorize their experiences in a way that helps them to understand themselves as intentional agents with continuity through time (McAdams, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1991). This will enable them to feel like they have a voice, which in turn will help them to handle the difficulties of pastoral leadership. In other words, narrative is a way for practicum students to translate knowing into telling. Moon (2006) suggests that assignments such as learning journals may be able to link learning with reflection and identity by way of storytelling. She proposes a number of frameworks to make sense of the story: personal story; “know” story told in a professional, workplace, educational, or similar setting; nonfiction but “not personally known” story; and fiction and fantasy (Moon, 2006, pp. 122-131).

From a teaching and learning perspective, these instances of telling also need to happen in the context of the classroom in the form of discussion. As I mentioned above, teachers need to create assignments that help students talk about the creation of their narrative selves. The classroom provides a broader setting that makes possible conversation that incorporate theological knowledge, religious tradition, and pastoral practice. If students are unable to link up with the larger body of theological knowledge and pastoral practices, their reflections might revert to an incomplete subjectivity or self.

Finally, many of the crises that students shared with me included questions of confidence, self-doubt, identity, and everyday difficulties encountered during practicum. For many of the practicum students, experiencing crisis gave them the opportunity to pour meaning into their experiences, to understand both what it means to be a pastoral leader and how to delineate and define that within their experiences. These crises created possibilities for reflection, understanding, and growth. For example, Nathaniel and Marnie’s crises continually compelled them to reflect on and explain their lives in a quest for a meaningful sense of personal coherence. Students’ experiences of crisis do bring up specific questions of pedagogy, and perhaps one way to address this is to see the classroom in the context of community. Palmer (1998) explains this in terms of a community of truth,

truth does not reside primarily in propositions, and education is more than delivering propositions about objects to passive



auditors . . . knowing and teaching and learning look less like General Motors and more like a town meeting, less like a bureaucracy and more like bedlam. (p. 101)

For pedagogical community to take shape in the classroom, trust needs to be exhibited so that students can share their narratives. According to Curzon-Hobson (2002),

*trust* is a fundamental element in the pursuit of higher learning for it is only through a sense of *trust* that students will embrace an empowering sense of freedom, and the exercise of this freedom requires a risk on behalf of students and their teacher. (p. 266)

Improved *teaching* effectiveness can be obtained when teachers share responsibilities with students and work together with them to build trustful bonds (Corrigan & Chapman, 2008). Teachers must endeavor to be trustworthy educators (Trelstad, 2008), fostering trust so that students may have the opportunity to create and share their narratives in a safe environment.

## Conclusion

This action research project is an invitation to think seriously about the meaning of reflection in respect to how students understand themselves as potential professionals. It is my hope that teachers in higher education will use the four themes I identified to design their courses more intentionally, in a way that takes into account reflection from a student perspective and therefore aids practicum partners to understand better the journey that they have with their practicum students in respect to professional practice. A fundamental goal of professional education is for students to put together theory and practice, to broaden their range of professional methods, to become ethical in their practices, and to develop a knowledge base—all of which will enable them to become well-rounded practitioners. This article reflects the questions, struggles, and frustrations—as well as the successes—that students experience as they pursue this goal.

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## Note

1. Although stories may give away a lot about one's identity, I am aware that students (the tellers) sometimes do not see it. Reflection involves the presence of an observer position, the part of the self that can see the self (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014). Often, the aware listener can often decode a lot about identity of the teller, while the teller remains unaware.

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