



The complexities of practices: a reality check

Exploring the learning possibilities in a plural practice module of chaplaincy and religious leadership in 2020 while practicing social distancing

Anne Hege Grung

To cite this article: Anne Hege Grung (2021) The complexities of practices: a reality check, *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology*, 75:1, 67-78, DOI: [10.1080/0039338X.2021.1914896](https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2021.1914896)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2021.1914896>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 22 Apr 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 521



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

The complexities of practices: a reality check

Exploring the learning possibilities in a plural practice module of chaplaincy and religious leadership in 2020 while practicing social distancing

Anne Hege Grung

This article presents reflections over an internship module in the master programme “Leadership, Ethics and Counselling” at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo in the spring of 2020. This newly established master (2019) is equipping groups of students with different religions and worldviews for chaplaincy and leadership. The religiously and culturally plural learning environment that the master is aiming for doesn’t just foster understanding of cross-religious and cross-cultural situations and contexts. It also has ambitions of shaping and altering the learning perspectives in professional chaplaincy training towards acknowledging the importance of *co-formation*, not just formation, in order to emphasize the meaning of *relationships* in learning processes and not merely the enhancement of individual knowledge and skill acquirement. This article will reflect on the learning situation of an internship module during the spring of 2020 in the master programme mentioned above, when social – or rather physical – distancing suddenly was the rule among the population due to the covid-19 pandemic. How does one teach and learn the skills necessary for generic chaplaincy, existential care and religiously-/worldview-based leadership while being confined to home? The article draws on practice theory and empirical research from other contexts in order to derive learning outcomes for this particular internship module and establishes crucial questions around internship within academic theology in the Nordic context. The main questions are: What is the educational gain from the pluralily referred to above, and what happens to internship training when the spatial circumstances for professional practice are changed into mandatory

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

physical distancing? The article claims that working on these two questions relates to overarching questions around the place of practice in Nordic academic theology. An implicit question is whether it is possible to view practice as something happening only in a confined space.

Introduction

The “practical turn” in theology (and religious studies) and discussions about the scholarly term “practical theology” shows that the concept of *practice* is getting more attention within these fields. This is good news for all of us engaged in the nexus of practice and theory. It is also, I will claim, good news for academic theology as we mostly know it in the Nordic contexts; as a cluster of various disciplines connected to Christian sources, traditions, practices and faith communities. The structure and content of academic theologies in the Nordic contexts were originally shaped by the professional and practical needs of the churches, entailing that the general demands of the clergy’s professional skills were the glue keeping the different theological disciplines together. In Finland, Denmark, and Norway, the practical theological training in churches is still an integrated part of the academic training in the study programmes for theology.

The term “Practical theology” has mainly referred to Christian theologies and to theological practices of the Christian churches in the Nordic contexts and beyond. In the broader European and North American societal and academic contemporary contexts, however, we observe a growing religious pluralization of theological institutions of higher education, following the demographic changes related to religious belonging. Many theological institutions built around “Christian theology” no longer only hold chairs in the various Christian sub-disciplines of theology, interreligious studies/intercultural theology, but also in Islamic and Jewish theology, and some institutions include scholars in Buddhism and other religious traditions in their faculty.¹ A question we still don’t have any answer to is how this pluralization will engage with the field of Practical Theology. A related, but not overlapping question is whether the inclusion of Islamic, Jewish and other theological fields will enhance a broader and more diverse learning environment when it comes to educational practice elements in the study programmes and teaching. Because these elements have focused on internship in churches, church organizations and sometimes schools, for the professional education of ministers or teachers, this is not necessarily

the case. Other faith and life-stance communities have mostly not been loci of internship, because this has been outside of our educational purposes in Nordic theological institutions of higher education. Chaplaincy in public institutions, however, is a different case as I will show later in the article.

The ongoing discussions about practice may qualify us to become better educators as well as researchers, and by “better”, I mean more relevant, more cutting-edge, more able to embrace and interpret skilfully the complexities of theology and religious studies and the social structures and phenomena in which they are embedded. I believe our contemporary use of the concept of practice could be referred to in at least three ways when mainly relating to academic (Christian) theology: First, practice (or “praxis”) in theological reflections themselves, as a source of knowledge. Second, practice understood as a particular perspective of empirical research, such as practice theory and its place in theology. Third, practice as an educational activity, as internship, being part of our study programmes. In this article, I will primarily focus on internship, while still including the two other perspectives in the discussion. My ambition is to establish a cluster of relevant questions connected to aspects of the concept practice and thus contribute to further discussion.

I have been engaging with internship modules in the study programme of (Christian) theology at the University of Oslo since 2014. My experience is that these particular weeks for many students turn out to be a transformational part of their studies, as can be seen when they return to the classroom on campus and share their experiences and reflect over their own professional formation. What I will present and discuss here, however, is a case of an internship module in the master programme “Leadership, ethics and counselling” from the spring of 2020. This master, established 2019, aims to give a religion- and worldview-generic leadership and chaplaincy education. The keyword “generic” refers both to the student group, the interdisciplinary syllabi and the plurality of religions and worldviews represented in the formative aspect of the educational aim.

The first internship module of this master programme took place in the spring semester of 2020. It was from the beginning a pioneer project in the sense that for the first time in a Norwegian context, students of various religions and worldviews were about to become for six weeks part of chaplaincy teams in institutions serviced by chaplains from the Church of Norway. Some of the students were also planning to have their internship periods in NGOs, others, in relevant faith

communities. But with the covid-19 situation emerging rapidly in March of 2020 in Norway and elsewhere, the Norwegian government implemented a lockdown – three days before the practice period was about to start. This meant that we had to reorganize the module, and I will present the reasoning behind our choices and evaluate the learning process in the group during this process. The question is whether the extraordinary circumstances, as well as the intended dimension of diversity, may have offered a double possibility to become “de-familiarized” with our perspectives on internship modules at our faculty of theology and thus enabled to move beyond any taken-for-granted perspectives of the learning processes.

Practice as an integral part of study programmes in academic theology

Research on internship elements in academic theological programmes of study has been sparse in our Nordic contexts. This may indicate a certain taken-for-granted perspective on these modules, leaving them to a separate sphere of practice. How do we value and evaluate practice as integrated in our study programmes, and what perspectives do we engage with when we plan and conduct the professional training of our candidates? The Norwegian scholar Ingrid Reite claims that being a professional is “not a matter of identifying settling essential characteristics. Instead, professionalism can be accounted for in a relation to interchanging social and historical conditions in society”.² She expresses that professionals need to balance between engaging with established knowledge cultures and bringing new knowledge to the table in order to meet the needs of a dynamic and changing context.³ In her earlier research, Reite commented on the syllabi of the practical educational modules of the professional study programmes of (Christian) theology in Norwegian academic institutions. She commented on a tendency to emphasize individual learning, and to focus on students’ knowledge achievements. What she recommends as more adequate is a dynamic and relational view on learning, where a reflection over processes of learning itself surfaces in the syllabi.⁴ The empirical material of this research is by now almost a decade old, and things may have changed to some degree when it comes to which educational paradigms are engaged in our study programmes.

Connected to our study programme in (Christian) theology at the faculty of theology here at the University of Oslo, the learning aims

for the internship modules are presently connected to conveying three aspects of learning. These are: *Knowledge* (both theoretical and practical), *skills* related to professional tasks, and *competence* (referring to self-reflection and a social understanding of the role of a minister in the Church of Norway).⁵ This entails that the students are not expected to merely acquire the relevant knowledge. The instruction furthermore aims to include a formative aspect, engaging with the students' ethical reflections, general behaviour and social skills. The formative aspect consists of being exposed to and integrated in the traditional, ethical and social expectations of how a minister should relate to others as a professional. In more pluralized educational contexts, scholars have been inspired to add another aspect to the educational aims: *Co-formation*. This entails that the students should not only undergo processual elements of formation, but experience and learn from processes of *co-formation*. Jennifer Howe Peace reflects over how the religiously plural population in the US context requires theological institutions to train their students to serve a diverse community. She asks: "What does adequate preparation for the next generation of religious leaders and educators look like, given the complex multi-religious contexts in which our graduates will serve?"⁶ She suggests a paradigmatic shift from a model of formation to a model of co-formation, where "co-formation privileges learning with diverse religious communities over learning about the religious other".⁷ Co-formation aims at building relational knowledge and the avoidance of mentally organizing people according to a simple paradigm of "us and them", strictly based on religious affiliation. Peace engages with the term "pathological dualism" (Jonathan Sacks) to describe how religious faiths can initiate and legitimize the division of people in this way on the basis of religious belonging.⁸ Co-formation and relationship-building is a process where people learn from each other rather than about each other. It has an element of building personal trust and establishes spaces where you can show both strength and vulnerability – across religious boundaries and other human differences.

Peace's argument for aiming at co-formation rather than formation alone is a challenge to a mono-religious professional training of clergy and chaplains. It may even be considered to be a paradigm shift about how we view the world and our place in it from the perspective of a religious community. If we follow John Hick, each religion sees itself as the centre of the (religious) universe, but if we shift the perspective to see the divine as the centre and the religious traditions as "planets" circling around the centre, we may avoid developing strong "us and them" discourses which can grow from faith communities and are still pervasive

in academic theology. Related to professional training, one may say that the practice field in its complexity could be regarded as the centre of learning and the focus point rather than a specific training to serve a particular faith community. This may seem provocative for a theologically confessional professional education. However, the fact is that in our present training programmes for chaplaincy, where (Christian) theology students are trained to serve as chaplains in public institutions of care, the actual plurality of the populations within the institutions that are addressed by the chaplaincy has to be reflected in the learning itself. This has in particular been included in training engaging with an inclusive perspective towards non-religious users of the chaplaincy services. Increasingly, however, a plurality that also takes other religions and worldviews into consideration is acknowledged, inspired by the field of practice itself.

Complexities of practice: when the map and the terrain both suddenly vanish

As mentioned above, the six-week period of internship included in the master programme “Leadership, Ethics and Counselling” was just about to start when Norway entered into a social lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic. We had put much effort into the planning of this internship period, preparing both students, supervisors and institutions. The supervisors and institutions involved were ready to enrol interning students with diverse backgrounds, since they were used to supervising students from their own faith community (The Church of Norway), and the students were prepared to be supervised by someone with a different religion / worldview affiliation. Two of the questions we worked on throughout the preparation were: What difference does it make if the supervisor-student-relation is interreligious? What is the relationship between the general human aspects and the particular religious/worldview-based confessional aspects of chaplaincy work? We, the teachers, the supervisors and the students, were going into new terrain in the Norwegian context without having a fully drawn map.

The main public institution taking on the task of facilitating a large group of these students as trainees was a high security prison close to Oslo, Ullersmo prison. They had planned to temporarily change the name of the chaplaincy work to “interfaith chaplaincy work” (in Norwegian: from “prestetjenesten” to “tros- og livssynstjenesten”) to reflect the novel plurality represented by the student group. However, Norwegian

prisons were literally the first places to close down. In order to protect the inmates, all non-staff and all visitors were prohibited to visit the facilities. Then everything else, including the University of Oslo, closed down too. The first evening and morning after the lockdown, I spent thinking about what we could do when all the plans for the students' internship module were cancelled due to the lockdown. Should we cancel the entire course, and try to arrange something at a later stage? So much was unclear about the situation, not only related to the university and how teaching now would be organized, but at all levels of life. Now, not only did we not have a map; we apparently did not have a terrain.

In class, when we had been preparing for the practice element as originally planned, we read and discussed two articles on practice theory. Gary Rolfe's "Rethinking reflective education: What would Dewey have done?" is a text stressing that experiential knowledge from "reflection in action" is classified to be at the bottom of current knowledge hierarchies, but crucial for successful professional training.⁹ He claims that "tame problems" can be solved through engaging with knowledge already well known, whereas "wicked problems" – complex situations where there is no obvious solution – always require experimental action and reflection together with the establishment of a relationship between the professional and the help-seeker. In "Pragmatism: Learning as creative imagination", Bente Elkjær discusses the notion of experience and demonstrates that educational processes connected to practice do not primarily concern method or defined professional skills, but rather the development of a particular way of carrying out professional presence – how one carries out one's own being in the professional situations. In addition, Elkjær stresses a capability to work with "wicked" or complicated challenges and relate constructively to the chaos of reality. It struck me that this was exactly what we all faced the moment the lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 took effect. There were certainly elements of chaos, uncertainty, "wicked" problems and challenges of practical and existential character abruptly introduced to our existences in various ways. Consequently, I decided that we would turn the entire situation into our field of practice. I suggested to the very disappointed students that we should not cancel, but *change* the internship period and use it to investigate, reflect and act from where we were restricted to be: In our homes, behind our computer screens or on the phone. The pioneering educational module, where students with other backgrounds than the Church of Norway or who had been granted access to chaplaincy teams and relevant NGO's for their

professional training to become leaders and chaplains, was transformed into another kind of pioneering educational endeavour. How do you conduct internships from your own sofa or kitchen table, online? I set up four possible working questions for the students in order to indicate ways to do this. They could choose to work with the ones most relevant for them. We also set up two weekly online sessions of 1.5 h to discuss their work and establish group supervision facilitated by me. The students accepted the revised programme for the internship period and we started.

I still remember very well our first online class after the lockdown. The students' faces together with my own face staring back at me from the computer screen, all pale and confused, many obviously after having had a very bad night's sleep. Everyone was present. Most of us had been more or less in isolation for a couple of days, some of us, including myself, did not feel particularly well. Some had large families with children to care for. Others were living alone. I realized that this transformed internship period was not only a challenge for the students, but also for me as their teacher. I had to function as a supervisor for them, and as a work leader – two roles beyond my role as a teacher. In these capacities, I decided that we should start every online class with an open round, where I simply asked each student: How are you today? The question was an open invitation to share whatever the students wanted to share, and when all had finished, I shared with them how I was. The reasoning behind this was to get us to start sharing with each other in order to establish a dialogical, shared space where we could learn from each other and generate a feeling of trust as an anchor in the learning process. For me, this was a matter of employing a method of dialogical pedagogy, a decision emerging from a deep concern for the students and their wellbeing. Particularly in the first frightening weeks, we were all watching horrible news about the suffering caused by the pandemic in many places. During these days, reality felt as if the world as we knew it had come to an end for many of us.

In the alternative working plan for the internship module, four working areas were outlined for the students as possible entry points for internship work:

- (1) To observe, investigate and formulate the various needs created by the current covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in their close environments and/or in their own religious or worldview community regarding spiritual and existential care.

- (2) To explore possibilities of spiritual and existential care when practicing physical distancing because of the pandemic.
- (3) To document responses to the pandemic situation by their faith or worldview community or their workplace: What kind of leadership is performed? How is the crisis management executed?
- (4) Practicing of existential and spiritual care: The students had to find ways to be included in care practices and counselling in their own faith or worldview community, or volunteering for humanitarian organizations.

The students selected what they felt was possible and/or relevant for them. They presented their work-in-progress in our zoom-group.

What did the students actually do? One of the students established a blog to share existential reflections over the situation and opened for comments. Two others shared problems and reflections from their home-office work as they performed their part-time jobs with their faith- or worldview communities. Yet another discussed how to engage as a spiritual caregiver in the faith community where he/she belonged. A couple of them started documenting how their own workplace or faith/life-stance community responded to their employees/members and how they communicated evaluations. Some of the students deliberately intensified contact with friends, family and acquaintances digitally or by telephone, to share company or talk. One of the students became involved in marriage counselling and counselling for people suffering directly from covid-19. The students reflected over their practices and findings, and shared in our zoom sessions through prepared presentations, followed by comments and discussions. The group turned into a supervising group, and the plurality among the students became an important pedagogical asset. In the group, there were students with secular humanist, Islamic, Buddhist, Christian and non-affiliated backgrounds, with no particular background having a majority. I have argued elsewhere that plurality in a student group (and among teachers) enhances learning processes and relational learning.¹⁰ One of the salient features is how relationships and the exchange of reflections across the lines dividing religions/worldviews and cultures establishes a surplus of meaning and access to various interpretations and perspectives available in the communication. This fits well into Peace's request for co-formation referred to earlier in this article, and learning with and from each other rather than about each other. She states: "Interreligious learning through relationship building [is] a broader process of formation. Knowing that your conversation partner both understands and appreciates you as a

person creates the possibility for the kind of trust and vulnerability that can lead to transformative learning.”¹¹ In their evaluation reports, the students described our online supervision group as a space for mutual support that offered a possibility to deepen the existing relationships within the group, making open reflection and self-reflection possible. One mentioned the diverse group as a place to nurture creativity and innovative thinking. Yet another student stated that she found the group to be a place for emotional and reflective support across religious and worldview affiliation, a place for “true dialogue in practice”.

The dynamics of practice and its crucial guidance for theory

The planned challenge connected to this particular internship module could be articulated as follows: How to establish a process of co-formation and facilitate an interreligious relationship between the supervisors and the students in order to provide the students with the skills necessary for chaplaincy and leadership in contexts marked by a plurality of religions and worldviews? The unplanned challenge became this: How to acquire skills in conducting spiritual and existential care, and in professional leadership, when physical distancing is mandatory and the internship institutions are closed for students? The salient questions arising from these challenges in our contexts of internship and practice at our Nordic institutions of higher education could be: Where are the places of practice? Are such places confined to organizations and institutions? Could defining a place of practice be part of the practice itself? And further: How can we provide excellent places of co-formation for the students, and guide the processes of co-formation in a skilful manner? If we include these questions in our quest for theory, syllabi and the practical organization of our internship modules, we would most probably not only engage with a paradigm shift from formation to co-formation. We would also engage with a shift from focusing on particular institutions to engaging with a broader range of “wicked problems”, of interpreting the future work of our students in a more complex frame. At the time of writing this article, we have not yet reached the end of the covid-19 pandemic. We already know, however, that the world will be a different place after the pandemic, economically and socially, and as it is seen with existential and meaning-making lenses as well. The crisis of the pandemic is not limited to health, suffering and deaths, but includes loneliness and the loss of meaning and human connections. It has shown the meaning of trust and distrust, and has shown that the populations of wealthy

nation-states are also vulnerable as collectives, not only as individuals. New questions will be raised to our religious and worldview-based communities, as well as to our institutions of higher education. In order to provide relevant knowledge, these questions are of great importance, and we should actively search for answers to them.

Anne Hege Grung
Faculty of Theology
University of Oslo
P.O. Box 1072 Blindern
Oslo 0316
Norway
annehg@teologi.uio.no

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Weisse et al., *Pluralisation of Theologies*.
2. Christensen, "Pastors," 390.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Christensen, "Hvem, hva, hvordan?" 49.
5. University of Oslo, "TEOL4210."
6. Peace, "Religious Self, Religious Other," 202.
7. *Ibid.*, 201.
8. *Ibid.*, 202.
9. Rolfe, "Rethinking Reflective Education."
10. Grung, "Religious and Worldview," 110.
11. Peace, "Religious Self, Religious Other," 202.

Bibliography

- Christensen, I. R. "Hvem, hva, hvordan? Læring i presteutdanningen." *Halvårsskrift for praktisk teologi* 28, no. 2 (2011): 47–58.
- Christensen, I. R. "Pastors and the Perpetuum Mobile: The Dynamics of Professional Learning in Times of Reform." *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 23, no. 3 (2015): 389–409.
- Elkjær, B. "Pragmatism: Learning as Creative Imagination." In *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists ... in Their Own Words*, edited by Knud Illeris, 66–82. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.
- Grung, A. H. "Religious and Worldview Diversity, Dialogue and Pedagogy: The Educational Promise of Complexity." In *Pluralisation of Theologies at European*

- Universities*, edited by Wolfram Weisse, Julia Ipgrave, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Muna Tatari, 105–112. Münster: Waxmann, 2020.
- Peace, J. H. "Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model for Interreligious Education." In *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments of Empathy*, edited by Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell, 201–219. Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020.
- Rolfe, G. "Rethinking Reflective Education: What Would Dewey Have Done?" *Nurse Education Today* 34 (2014): 1179–1183.
- University of Oslo. "TEOL4210 – Profesjonsetikk, sjelesorg og institusjonspraksis." University of Oslo. Accessed August 31, 2020. <https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/teologi/tf/TEOL4210/index.html>.
- Weisse, W., J. Ipgrave, O. Leirvik, and M. Tatari, eds. *Pluralisation of Theologies at European Universities*. Münster: Waxmann, 2020.