

A Brief Report

“Collaborative Learning in the SMP Program: Partnership in the Gospel”

Introduction

In His infinite love for His people God continues to nurture us and to form us. His work in our lives is not a “one and done” commitment but is an ongoing process that serves to strengthen our faith in Him and our fervent love toward one another. As J.T. Mueller notes, “Our Lutheran dogmaticians have rightly emphasized the great truth that ‘the theologian is not born, but made’ and not by human efforts, reason, or strength. Theology is a God-given habitude.” How the Holy Spirit accomplishes this is excellently described by Luther in the famous dictum: *Oratio* (prayer), *Meditatio* (study), *Tentatio* (trial, experience) are the elements that cooperate in the making of a theologian.

Although the Lord’s process for nurturing us remains consistent, the context in which this process occurs certainly varies. For those who enter seminary studies to become pastors in His church this context also varies. The Synod provides for both on-campus seminary education that leads to the Master of Divinity degree and “in-the-field” SMP seminary studies that lead to ordination. Although each route to the pastoral ministry plays an essential role through the formative process of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, each route provides its own unique blend of resources through which this maturing process occurs.

The purpose of this Brief Report is to introduce one such aspect of theological education - collaborative learning: its purpose, its manifold benefits, and its design and management in the SMP program. Welcome to this introductory presentation. Our fervent hope is that you, your fellow students, your pastoral mentor, and your congregation members will gain insights and skills through this Brief Report that will enhance your wondrous and grace-filled growth as a child of the Heavenly Father.

What is “Collaborative Learning”?

The Association of Theological Schools’ (ATS) accreditation standards speak of collaborative learning in this way: “The school demonstrates an intentionally collaborative approach to student learning and formation by developing a cohesive and holistic curriculum, regardless of modality, that involves faculty and, as appropriate to the school’s context and degree program, librarians, student services personnel, field educators, and others - both in designing and in evaluating the curriculum...in a viable community of learning...and form collaborative partnerships to enhance student learning and formation...to create an environment in which student learning is fostered and retention is strengthened...” (Standards 3.7, 3.9, 7.0, 7.5) Smith and MacGregor (1997) summarize many of the important assumptions about learners and the collaborative learning process in this way: learning is an active, constructive process; learning depends on rich contexts; learning brings multiple perspectives; learning styles, experiences, and aspirations work collaboratively; and learning includes mutual exploration of content, through cooperation

and teamwork. Furthermore, collaborative learning gives learners an opportunity to engage in discussions, take responsibility for their own learning, and thus become critical thinkers. (Laal and Laal, 2011)

God Speaks of Collaborative Learning

Before we continue with our exploration of collaborative learning, it behooves us as God's children to hear of God's own commitment and active participation in collaborative learning. The prophet Isaiah, speaking of the promised Messiah, the Servant, wrote, "The Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught." (Isaiah 50:4)

This passage not only spoke of God's hand of support upon the Servant, Jesus; in a real sense this also described the Lord's work in Isaiah's life. The Lord had, indeed, given Isaiah an instructed tongue. Through this gift Isaiah came to realize it was the Word of God alone that could sustain the weary. However, the Lord's commitment to Isaiah and to his ongoing formation did not end there. The Lord had a certain "continuing education" with which to further equip and embolden His prophet. The Lord would awaken Isaiah morning by morning with further instruction, and through the living Word Isaiah would continue to grow as a man of God through whom the Lord would, indeed, comfort the weary and enlighten those in darkness.

This collaborative learning is the same gift the Lord brings to you. Morning by morning He awakens you to the fresh truths of His Word, to the unfathomable depths of His love, to His faithfulness to you, and to the opportunities He provides for your sharing of His Word with others - with your family, your professors, your pastoral mentor, your fellow students, and your congregation. He remains at your side as your Comforter and Counselor, your Good Shepherd and your Master Teacher.

What comfort! What grace! What assurance! These gifts enable us to receive and to celebrate the wondrous comfort of which St. Paul joyfully wrote: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:3-6)

This is collaborative learning at its best; His promise to you this very day and every day hereafter.

Collaborative Learning in the SMP Program

Collaborative learning in the SMP model of theological education encompasses many learning partnerships, none of which stands alone or excludes the other collaborative learning partners. Consider, for example, these learning partnerships:

*student and professors

*student and fellow students

*student and pastoral mentor

*student and congregation

*student and family

Each partnership will be further explored later in this Brief Report. However, at this point ponder these questions and your conceptualization of collaborative learning in each partnership:

- How will collaborative learning evidence itself in your relationship with your respective professors? To what extent will this vary somewhat from class to class?
- How will collaborative learning evidence itself in your relationship with fellow students? What role will shared assignments play? What role will mutual Christian consolation and encouragement play?
- How will collaborative learning evidence itself in your relationship with your pastoral mentor? What might a typical learning session with your mentor include?
- How will collaborative learning evidence itself in your partnership with your congregation? Why is this aspect of collaborative learning so essential in the SMP program?
- How will collaborative learning evidence itself in your family relationships? With spouse? With children?
- How well-equipped are you for leveraging the potentials of multi-faceted collaborative learning in the SMP program? What are your relative strengths in striving to do so? What are your relative weaknesses in striving to do so?

Adult Learners

Christine Blair (1997) in her ATS published article “Understanding Adult Learners: Challenges to Theological Education” writes that the quest to understand adults, how they learn, grow, and change, what their needs and desires are, has resulted in a large, complex body of literature. Her insights focus on learning, rather than teaching, although theories of adult learning implicitly or explicitly point to certain requirements for the teaching of adults. Blair acquaints us with many thought-provoking questions about teaching graduate theological education in light of the adult learning literature. These insights are also quite helpful in preparing and forming SMP-level students in their simultaneous roles as learners and as teachers - particularly so in the unique collaborative learning context of SMP studies. Here the SMP student serves simultaneously as a teacher and as a member of the multi-faceted collaborative learning team.

Among Blair’s insights are these:

1. Adults learn best when the learning environment feels safe and supportive. Several factors can help create a supportive learning environment: respect for learners' knowledge, community, collaboration, mentors, and good organization.
2. Adults learn best when their minds are engaged. Empirical research in this area shows that adult learning does not necessarily decline with age and can even increase when the need to learn is great. Several catalysts serve to engage the mind of the adult: interest, multiple opportunities for reflection, the drive to push onward to more learning in the context of knowledge gaps or creative applications of knowledge, and openness to the unexpected - the "Aha!" breakthroughs that stimulate even more learning and growing.
3. Adults learn best when their learning is grounded in their experiences. Adults prefer learning that applies to life situations, here and now, being listened to as knowers, and having their needs met (e.g., the need to increase quality of life and skills).
4. Adults learn best when they are self-directed, i.e., the determination to learn how to learn, having some control over the learning process, and unlearning inaccurate knowledge and dysfunctional habits.
5. Adults learn best when education speaks to mind, heart, and soul (i.e., knowledge that is creative, intuitive, contemplative, and imaginative).

Stop here and react to Blair's insights for you as an SMP learner. Do you agree with her insights about adult learners? Do you disagree? If so, why? How would you paraphrase her insights as an adult learner engaged in theological education pursuits?

Next, before we leave this section carefully ponder Blair's insights as they pertain to collaborative learning designs and practices in the SMP model. Summarize her insights for your collaborative learning pursuits that will engage you with your professors, your fellow students, your pastoral mentor, your congregation, and your family. As you do so, remember the enormous opportunities for multi-faceted collaborative learning that serve as essential components in SMP studies. You can begin to appreciate how the application of adult learning theory and research can substantially contribute to the effectiveness of your collaborative learning endeavors.

Recognize and Respect Learning Styles

How do you learn best? For example, what modalities serve you well? Do you learn best through reading, watching, listening, or through hands-on experiences? Do you prefer a variety of learning styles, perhaps depending upon the content and the purpose of your learning? Do you prefer structured learning experiences or more spontaneous learning experiences? Do you prefer to learn with others or do you prefer to learn independently? The sage advice, "Know thyself," also pertains to learning styles, doesn't it?

In a sense, your design and management of collaborative learning starts with this essential matter; but it does not end at that point. Profitable collaborative learning also requires that you know something about the preferred learning styles of those with whom you are in collaboration. This, too, is an essential matter.

Stop now and briefly summarize your preferred learning style. How efficient do you anticipate that your learning style will be in your theological education pursuits? How prepared are you to expand upon your preferred learning styles as needed for you do so in your studies?

Next, ask yourself how well you know (and are able to accommodate) the preferred learning styles of those with whom you are in SMP collaborative learning relationships? Why is this an important factor in effectively designing and managing your wide-ranging collaborative learning endeavors in the SMP model? Also, how well do your collaborators know and accommodate your learning preferences?

Your Collaborative Learning Partners

For simplicity's sake, let's assume that your learning encompasses the mastery of certain content and simultaneously the enhancement of certain skills. For example, your Homiletics course will enhance your knowledge of homiletical standards and formats. Furthermore, your growing homiletical knowledge will contribute to the development of your preaching skills, e.g., the construction and delivery of your sermons. However, your homiletics education will do more. It will assist you in effective engagement with your ministry context, including the characteristics and needs of your hearers. Your homiletical education will also enhance the application of all this knowledge to facilitate the reception and the life-changing power of your sermons, God's inspired Word. Your homiletical learning, however, will not occur in isolation from your collaborative learning partners. You will learn from them, and they will learn from you.

That sounds rather idyllic, doesn't it? So how specifically will such collaborative learning effectively occur? How will the many resources available to you and your learning partners be leveraged to maximize the learning of each person? In this next section of this Brief Report we will consider these and related matters in your collaborative learning partnerships. The suggestions that will be offered are merely suggestions. Expand these suggestions as you see fit to do. Be creative. Feel free to modify these modest suggestions. Confidently develop your own meaningful collaborative learning strategies and please share them with us.

Collaborative Learning Enhancements

As the ATS Standards have informed us, collaborative learning partnerships (i.e., the "learning community") enhance student learning and pastoral formation. In the SMP program your collaborative learning partners include your professors, your fellow students, your pastoral mentor, your congregation, and your family. But the question before us now is simply this: How can each collaborative partnership be enhanced?

As we consider this essential matter and each respective partnership through which you will be blessed in the SMP program, realize that there are many enhancements that are common to each partnership. These more general enhancements include:

*Familiarization with each person's learning preferences, gaining respect for each person's learning preferences, and becoming flexible in your own learning style as you learn collaboratively

*A willingness to learn from each learning partner and practice good listening skills

*A respect for the numerous life roles and responsibilities your respective learning partners have

*Patience in your relationship with each learning partner and becoming realistic in your expectations of each

*Asking each of your learning partners what makes for a good collaborative learning relationship for them

*Considering yourself as a blessing to each of your learning partners and expressing your gratitude, encouragement, and prayerful support to each fellow learner

The variety of fellow learners in your collaborative SMP studies will also require some partnership supports that will be somewhat unique to each respective partnership. Consider these thought starters.

Collaborative Learning with Your Professors

- As needed, express any learning accommodations you may need from your respective professors (e.g., extended testing time, supplemental study materials).
- Ask clarifying questions (e.g., regarding content matters, assignments, applications of content to your ministry context) of your respective professors. They will be eager to be of assistance.
- Develop and practice good communication skills with each professor. They cannot read minds.
- As you enjoy your learning, assertively consider ways to further facilitate your learning retention and applications. Consider varying your learning strategies, depending upon the nature and the complexity of each respective course. Utilize your analytical skills and your creative skills. This may include developing visual learning aids such as charts, outlines, diagrams, flash cards (even color-coordinated cards); developing audio learning supports such as recordings. Be sure to share your learning tools and strategies with your professors (and your fellow students) and be open to their suggestions for your enhanced learning.

Collaborative Learning with Your Fellow Students

- Share study resources and strategies; learn from one another.
- As needed, consider conducting study sessions with your fellow students, perhaps face-to-face, on-line, or both.

- Look for opportunities to create or request meaningful collaborative assignments from your respective professors.
- Continue to learn of the preferred learning styles of your fellow students and take time to share your own learning preferences. Learn from one another in this way and be eager to enrich your own learning skillset from what you are learning from your classmates.

Collaborative Learning with Your Pastoral Mentor

- Take time to consult the “SMP Manual” regarding the mentor-protégé relationship. Seek ways to strengthen this partnership in learning through the sharing of learning resources, study strategies, study joys, and study struggles.
- Draw on your mentor’s own pastoral experiences, insights, and skills as you work collaboratively through each course. Also draw on the insights of your District staff, your Circuit Visitor, and the pastors in your Circuit Forum.
- Explore pastoral applications of content and skills through the development and utilization of case studies.

Collaborative Learning with Your Congregation

- Develop effective ways to include the entire congregation (or a specific subset of the congregation such as your church council, Board of Elders, youth, Bible study groups...) in your studies. Consider strategies such as presenting a concise written or oral summary report at the conclusion of each course (or unit within a given course) regarding class content, insights, and possible applications in the ministry of the congregation, in the lives of your members, and to others in your community.
- Take steps to otherwise creatively and effectively engage your congregation in your studies and the ongoing formation of your knowledge and pastoral skills. For example, prepare a brief study on the basis of each course for members to study and thoughtfully ponder as your partners in the work of the Kingdom. Consider developing a series of brief podcasts that would serve this same purpose.
- Enlist congregational participation in the formation of learning goals they may have for your SMP program of studies and for themselves. Take the effort to revisit these throughout your course of studies and, thereby, further facilitate the active participation of your learning partners. This practice could also sow seeds for others in your congregation to one day pursue seminary studies.

Collaborative Learning with Your Family

- Keep your family members apprised of your studies, and the joys and struggles you are experiencing. You are loved by them, and they are loved by you. Open communication and sharing further demonstrates this love.
- If you are married, continue to carefully and lovingly inquire about your spouse’s own needs and stressors they may be experiencing as you engage in your SMP studies.

Continue to express mutual Christian support and acceptance, being careful to include their needs in your own ongoing assessment of yourself and how you are managing your seminary studies and family obligations.

- Sincerely seek the input of your family as you strive to balance your life roles and commitments, e.g., your roles and commitments as a Christian husband, father, church member, employee, employer, citizen, and seminary student. Be willing to seek your mentor's assistance or professional counseling assistance as may be needed in balancing and enhancing family well-being: spiritual, social, emotional, physical, vocational, intellectual...

Closing Thoughts

Welcome to the seminary community of learners and to the SMP course of study that awaits you. Your studies for the pastoral ministry will be both demanding and rewarding. You will become acquainted with grand truths of theology and with grand theologians. Through your studies the Lord of the Church will be busy enhancing your knowledge, your skills, and your faith. You will engage in collaborative learning experiences and learn of many, many collaborative learning resources. These God-given resources include your faculty, your fellow students, your pastoral mentor, your congregation, and yes, your beloved family. Let the inspired words of St. Paul again ring out: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:3-6)

Rev. Jan Case, 2026

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